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College of Charleston must recognize politics club, pay \$20,000 for students' legal fees in suit

BY MIKAELA PORTER MPORTER@POSTANDCOURIER.COM

JUN 7, 2019



Randolph Hall at The College of Charleston. File/Robert Behre/Staff

The College of Charleston must recognize a new politics club geared toward civic engagement now that it has settled a federal lawsuit filed by two students last fall.

The college will also pay \$20,000 to cover the two students' legal fees.

Jeremy Turner, a rising junior, and Adam Gainey, who since has graduated, were represented by the Arizona-based Alliance Defending Freedom organization, which typically takes on religious freedom cases.

College of Charleston spokesperson Mike Robertson declined to comment on the legal settlement.

Turner and Gainey attempted to form a club for students to learn about political issues and involvement. But they were denied funding by both student government leaders and by university administrators who felt the new club aligned too closely with a group that already existed, their attorney Caleb Dalton said Friday.

That existing club — called the Fusion Party — is different than the group Turner and Gainey were trying to organize, Dalton said.

The Fusion Party's Facebook page describes itself as an organization that educates students on local and state politics, campaigns and procedure, including pending bills. It says it doesn't limit itself to one party.

Dalton argued that the Fusion Party is more politically charged and aligns with certain political ideas.

By not recognizing the South Carolina Politics Club, Turner and Gainey were denied access to funding and meeting space on campus.

The college also changed its policy regarding how new student groups organize and receive recognition from the college. Dalton said students will only have to show that they have enough members to organize, and fill out a form.

“It was a very complex mixture of student government approval and administrative approval and required discretion at multiple levels with administrators and students,” he said. “They could deny students for a lot of different reasons. [Turner and Gainey] made substantive change so there's no discretion to deny clubs and turned it into a straightforward process.”

Gainey has graduated and plans to attend the University of South Carolina School of Law this fall. Turner will begin the next school year as president of the newly formed South Carolina Politics Club.

Neither would comment for this story but instead referred questions to Dalton.

Reach **Mikaela Porter** at 843-937-5906. Follow her on Twitter @mikaelaporterPC.

MIKAELA PORTER

Mikaela Porter joined The Post and Courier in April 2019 and writes about the city of Charleston. Previously, Mikaela reported on breaking news, local government, school issues and community happenings for The Hartford Courant in Hartford, Conn.