

Atheists organize at religious colleges

by [Kimberly Winston](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

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Late one night over pizza, University of Dayton students Branden King and Nick Haynes discovered neither of them believed in God. Surely, they thought, they couldn't be the only nonbelievers at the Roman Catholic college.

Last year, King and Haynes and a couple of other like-minded students applied to the administration to form the Society of Freethinkers, a student club based on matters of unbelief.

The university rejected their application—and rejected it again this past September. Without university approval, the group cannot meet on campus, tap a student activities fund, participate in campus events or use campus media. For now, the group meets at a cafe off campus, relying on word of mouth to draw members, up to about 15 now. And they are appealing the rejection.

"A religious campus can be a lonely place for someone who doesn't subscribe to faith," said King, now 23 and a graduate student in biology. "We want to reach out to these people."

The Dayton students are not alone. The Secular Student Alliance, a national organization of nontheistic students with 320 campus chapters, reports that at least two other religious universities—Notre Dame and Baylor—have rejected clubs for atheist, agnostic, humanist and other nontheistic students. Students at Duquesne University, a Catholic school, say they have little hope of approval on their first application

this year.

All the schools say they rejected the clubs because they conflict with their Christian mission—which perplexes some students, who note that Duquesne, Dayton and Notre Dame gave approval to Muslim and Jewish student clubs. Dayton and Duquesne have also approved of gay student groups.

"The only difference between us and them is our club's agenda does not assume the existence of the Judeo-Christian God," said Stephen Love, 21, a Notre Dame student whose application was rejected twice. "I think those clubs should be allowed, but if they are going to use that line of reasoning to reject us, they should be consistent."

James Fitz, Dayton's vice president, said the school can support a gay student club without condoning the members' sexual orientation. Approving non-Catholic religious clubs is also acceptable, because faith in God is involved.

"As a Marianist university we aspire 'to educate for formation in faith,'" he wrote in an e-mail, quoting Marianist principles.

Many students say their peers are supportive of their nontheistic clubs. Others have asked why, if they do not believe in God, they chose a religious school in the first place.

Haynes and King came to Dayton after attending Catholic high schools. Andrew Tripp, president of DePaul University's Alliance for Free Thought, liked DePaul's urban setting and its service to Chicago's poor. Brandi Stepp said that as an atheist she worried about choosing DePaul but was drawn by the reputation of the theater department.

"I thought I might have to keep my mouth shut about a lot of things," she said. "I was really interested in finding a community of like-minded people. I saw the SSA ad, showed up and had a great time."

Not all religious schools

reject nontheist clubs. California Lutheran University has an active group that regularly cooperates with religious groups on campus, and DePaul has a thriving group that meets with administration support.

"Once

they realized we were not going to march on the president's office demanding the de-Catholization of the university they were very amenable to our goals," said Tripp. Suzanne Kilgannon, director of DePaul's Office of Student Involvement, said the club's goal of open inquiry into matters of faith—and nonfaith—conforms to the school's Catholic mission.

"We looked at it as: we are the marketplace of ideas, so how could we not have an organization like this?" she said. "Because it is important to study all sides of the subject—regardless of the subject—we felt like this club belonged here."

Other religious

schools have arrived at the same conclusion. There are sanctioned Secular Student Alliance chapters at Southern Methodist University, Luther College, Presbyterian College and Iowa's Central College. Jesse Galef, SSA's communications director, said some religious universities misunderstand the purpose of nontheist clubs. It isn't to promote atheism, he said, but to provide "a safe place" for students exploring nonbelief.

"Secular student groups promote discussion, and community and compassion," Galef said. "If the University of Dayton and other schools value these things, they need to stop refusing secular students the same rights religious students have."

Galef has heard

from Baylor students who said they felt threatened with expulsion because of their lack of faith. The Baylor Atheist/Agnostic Society continues to meet, organizing through a private Facebook page with 69 members. No one in the group would agree to be interviewed.

Nick

Shadowen, a philosophy major who proposed a secular society at Duquesne and is currently awaiting the administration's decision, sees a gap between religious and nonreligious students.

"A lot of students

come from small, conservative towns centered around church where there is not a lot of discussion about atheists, and so they are sort of forced to keep their opinion to themselves," he said. "This group is a chance to show the rest of the student body we are just like everyone else." —RNS