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A Difficult Choice: Amid Political Shifts, GU Students Confront Barriers to Reproductive Advocacy, Education

While universities and national policies have historically supported pro-abortion student groups, momentum is now gathering behind the anti-abortion movement on college campuses.

By Saroja Ramchandren, Opal Kendall and Bridget Galibois



As a Jesuit institution, Georgetown's policy on reproductive care and education must balance student interests with guidance from the Catholic Church, leading pro-abortion groups to provide additional training and resources. | Photos by Right To Life / Facebook, Darren Rigger, Illustration by Aria Zhu / The Hoya.

In the early 1990s, change felt inevitable for the pro-abortion movement at Georgetown University.

Kelli McTaggart (COL '92, LAW '98) — co-founder of GU Choice, a now-defunct pro-abortion rights student group that the university officially recognized in 1991 — spent her evenings leading student discussions about reproductive care.

She said the university's decision was largely symbolic.

"It was important that the university recognize this group as an important issue that was worthy of formal recognition," McTaggart told The Hoya. "There were a lot of students who not only supported the issue, but — even more importantly — supported having a discussion about the issue."

In exchange for access to university benefits, which included student activity funds and the ability to reserve rooms, the group was prohibited from conducting reproductive advocacy due to the university's Catholic identity, limiting the club to student discussions.

Andi Clark-Ciganek (SFS '94), an early member of GU Choice, said members worked around advocacy regulations, specifically concerning clinic defense — escorting patients past anti-abortion protesters attempting to physically block access to abortion clinics.

“We would gavel the meeting in,” Clark-Ciganek told The Hoya. “We would conduct official business — where we were a discussion group around abortion and reproductive rights — and then we would gavel out and I would organize everybody to go to clinics and do escorting.”

In 1992, the university rescinded recognition, citing multiple violations of the ban on advocacy.

Darren Rigger (SFS ’91), a member of GU Choice, said that despite the university’s decision, the group felt supported by the student body and national politics.

“Bill Clinton was sweeping into the election, the Democrats won everywhere and took the House and the Senate,” Rigger told The Hoya. “He started to codify the idea of choice and protections for abortion clinics. We were definitely catching the wave. That was the fight. We’re on the right side of the fight.”

Thirty-three years later, following the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision that eliminated the constitutional right to abortion, momentum has shifted in the opposite direction — the number of anti-abortion organizations on college campuses has grown and the federal government has taken steps to limit funding for pro-abortion student groups.

Elizabeth Oliver (CAS ’26) — the president of Georgetown University Right to Life (RTL), a university-recognized organization that opposes abortion, euthanasia and the death penalty — said RTL has gained traction.

“The Right to Life club has more than doubled in size since my freshman year,” Oliver told The Hoya. “More people are open to sharing their pro-life views. It’s not always easy in a university to share what you actually believe for fear of what other people might think about you, but more and more people are just saying, ‘Yeah, I am pro-life.’”

RTL has the added benefit of a mission that aligns with official university policy, which prohibits Georgetown and its affiliated medical institutions from prescribing birth control for family planning, providing abortions unless medically necessary or teaching health students how to deliver this care.

A university spokesperson said Georgetown’s Jesuit identity and commitment to student expression drives this policy.

“As the nation’s oldest Catholic and Jesuit university, Georgetown University is proud to be a university that deeply values our faith tradition and that encourages the free exchange of ideas,” the spokesperson wrote to The Hoya. “Individual students are permitted to express their opinions and ideas freely.”

Since the 1990s, pro-abortion student groups have worked to fill gaps in university reproductive care and education. Today, they face pressure to restrict abortion beyond campus boundaries and across the country.

Mind the Gap

H*yas for Choice (HFC), an abortion and reproductive rights organization that is not affiliated with the university, emerged in 1991 as a forum for students to advocate for abortion access.

Miya Yoshida (SFS ’28), HFC’s director of tabling and development, said the group compensates for a lack of university support.

“Our mission is to step in where the university falls short,” Yoshida told The Hoya. “The Jesuit values of Georgetown are a beautiful thing, but at the same time it can disadvantage the student body by not providing adequate resources to keep the students safe.”

The university prohibited previous abortion rights groups, like GU Choice, from this type of organizing in exchange for extending official recognition.

McTaggart said university recognition prevented the group from providing campus care — distributing birth control and contraception — as well as community care, such as conducting clinic defense.

“We couldn’t do anything to advocate for the issue,” McTaggart said. “We couldn’t really engage in things like going down to abortion clinics to help women who were trying to access those clinics.”

Despite this, the group found informal ways to conduct clinic defense, its primary advocacy effort. Rigger said his role was central to protecting patients’ safety.

“We would get there beforehand, physically use our bodies, lock the doors and then push our way out to create corridors where we can escort women from their cars into the facility for health care,” Rigger said.

Although GU Choice was able to conduct advocacy and discussion with general student support, some students felt GU Choice’s university-recognized status was at odds with Georgetown’s religious values.

Sean Keely (COL ’93) — a member of the Georgetown Ignatian Society, a student organization that opposed university recognition of GU Choice — said GU Choice’s recognized status was antithetical to Georgetown’s Jesuit identity.

“I’d grown up loving Georgetown — always wanted to go there — and I thought that it was a really special place, in large part because it was an excellent university, but one that was really imbued with the Catholic and Jesuit heritage,” Keely told The Hoya. “The decision to recognize what became GU Choice was entirely inconsistent with that.”

In Oct. 1991, the Georgetown Ignatian Society filed a canon lawsuit with Cardinal James Hickey, the archbishop of Washington, and, eventually, with Pope John Paul II, hoping to get Georgetown’s Catholic status revoked.

Keely, the lead student procurator for the lawsuit, said the decision was difficult to make.

“Ultimately, it comes down to truth. It’s not enough to say you’re something, the label needs to be genuine,” Keely said. “Ultimately, it wasn’t taken lightly, the decision to bring the petition, but it seemed thoroughly inconsistent.”

While the Holy See never ruled on the lawsuit, Georgetown ceased recognition of GU Choice in 1992.

For students seeking reproductive care today, RTL provides pamphlets with pregnancy and parenting resources in community spaces. The organization also runs diaper drives and volunteers at crisis pregnancy centers.

Leah Raymond (CAS ’26) — RTL marketing chair and senior director of the Cardinal O’Connor Conference (OCC), the largest student-led anti-abortion conference in the United States — said RTL provides parents with resources after the child is born.

“We’re not there to tell her to keep her baby and then disappear,” Raymond told The Hoya. “We want to be there throughout the pregnancy if she needs something — if she needs transportation somewhere. We have some folks with cars who are willing to take that responsibility on. Once she has the baby, let us know if she needs anything, whether it’s formula or diapers or babysitting.”

Oliver said the larger anti-abortion movement has shifted to focus on providing resources throughout a person’s pregnancy and after birth.

“We need to make sure there’s an abundance of resources for women to help them choose life,” Oliver said. “There’s been an emphasis on building more crisis pregnancy centers, offering more resources, which I think is a good thing.”

HFC distributes condoms and emergency contraception, coordinates pro-abortion rights speaker events and advocates for reproductive care for Georgetown students.

Kat Scarborough (CAS ’26), HFC’s former co-president, said the group is determined to promote reproductive justice in all forms.

“It can range from anything from providing access to menstrual products on campus, to contraceptives, to talking about health care issues and crises abroad,” Scarborough told The Hoya.

Faculty and staff are unable to participate in HFC’s advocacy efforts because the group is not university-recognized. Still, university members find ways to remain involved.

Nadia Brown, chair of the women’s and gender studies (WGST) program, said she stores HFC supplies underneath a desk in the WGST program space.

“There are limited things that we can do because we’re a Jesuit institution,” Brown told The Hoya. “Students and the administration have a ‘don’t ask-don’t tell’ understanding of things that student organizations can do that faculty and the administration cannot.”

Educating the Whole Person

Historically, Georgetown's Jesuit identity has also limited both formal and informal education about reproductive care.

During the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and '90s, the university established the Peer Education program, a university-led effort where student representatives taught other students about sexually transmitted infections, sexual assault and contraceptive devices, as well as provided condoms.

Clark-Ciganek, who was also a member of Peer Education, said the university supported the program, allowing them to distribute condoms as a mechanism for disease prevention.

"We had a big budget, we had faculty advisors, we had all kinds of good stuff. One of them was safe-sex education," Clark-Ciganek said.

In 1998, after pushback from Hickey and the Committee to Reform Peer Education, a student group concerned by the university's lack of abstinence education, Georgetown banned Peer Education from demonstrating and distributing condoms.

When it comes to classroom education for medical students at Georgetown today, students say the university's restrictions are more pronounced.

Georgetown University School of Medicine (GUSOM) does not teach miscarriage management, abortion care or hormonal birth control prescription in the pre-clinical years, although the Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics recommends the content. Other medical schools in the area, such as the George Washington University (GW) School of Medicine and Health Sciences (SMHS), cover these topics.

Dr. G. Kevin Donovan, a GUSOM emeritus professor, said the university has given lectures on abortion and physician-assisted suicide that promoted the Catholic moral view of the issues.

"It was thought to be inappropriate for a Catholic institution, a medical school, to be instructing people to do something that would promote abortion — because instructing people how to do it is certainly a promotion of the act," Donovan told The Hoya.

"What we tried to do was be true, not only to what we thought were the ethics and morals of the profession, but also congruent with those of Georgetown," Donovan added.

In lieu of receiving reproductive education at Georgetown, GUSOM professors encouraged Sabrina Deleonibus (MED '27), a third-year medical student interested in specializing in OBGYN, to do her OBGYN clinical rotation at Washington Hospital Center (WHC), another MedStar hospital that offers comprehensive family services. Although she ranked WHC as her first choice location, Deleonibus said a lottery system placed her at the Medstar Georgetown University Hospital.

"It was very clear that abortion was not going to be something that I was going to experience or see or partake in," Deleonibus told The Hoya.

"If you aren't interested in OBGYN, and you do OB at Georgetown specifically, you're definitely not getting the full breadth of reproductive education," Deleonibus added. "I do think that is a detriment."

In response to a lack of abortion medical practice, the unrecognized Georgetown chapter of Medical Students for Choice (MSFC), a nonprofit organization connecting medical students with reproductive education resources, hosts annual papaya workshops. The workshops teach students how to perform manual vacuum aspirations, a procedure used for miscarriage management and first-trimester abortion, on the fruit.

Alexandra Helfand (MED '28), the current president of MSFC at Georgetown, said medical school is an important opportunity to universally teach reproductive care before students choose their specialties.

"You might see it more in OBGYN, but you never know if you're an ER physician, and this is something that needs to be urgently done," Helfand told The Hoya. "It's a very important skill to have, regardless of the specialty that you're going into."

Deleonibus, MSFC's former co-president, said the systems students have developed to compensate for lacking university resources don't fully replace traditional classroom education.

“Residents and attendings are kind of aware of this culture at Georgetown, and have systems and ways of not only ensuring that people that are interested in OBGYN have outlets to practice those things, but also that patients get what they need when they need it,” Deleonibus said.

“It’s just unfortunate that you have to basically jump through hoops because of Catholic Jesuit principles.”

In 2019, for example, the university prohibited MSFC from hosting the externally-funded papaya clinics on campus, forcing the group to scramble to find an off-campus location and independent transportation.

To avoid similar situations, MSFC at Georgetown partnered with its peer group at GW, which has access to university benefits, including classroom spaces and faculty support.

Dr. Sara Imershein, the faculty sponsor of GW’s MSFC, said GUSOM students are missing out on a central part of their medical education.

“They are aware that they’re missing something, but they don’t know how much they’re missing,” Imershein told The Hoya.

“They don’t even know what exists to refer people, unless they seek out the education themselves,” Imershein added.

Changing Tides

With conservatism and anti-abortion sentiment on the rise on college campuses, change feels inevitable once again — but now momentum is behind anti-abortion groups at Georgetown.

Since the Supreme Court’s 2022 decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, 19 states have passed restrictive abortion laws and 12 states have restricted access to abortion entirely. Today, the majority of women in the United States ages 18 to 49 live in states with abortion restrictions.

Anti-abortion rhetoric is also on the rise. President Donald Trump, who was elected in 2024, has repeatedly criticized access to abortion, and conservative politicians have repeatedly called to limit abortion access. Today, 77% of registered Republicans consider themselves to be anti-abortion, compared to 16% of registered Democrats.

Raymond said the presence of a Republican administration has amplified anti-abortion rhetoric.

“I would say that in terms of momentum, not just in the coalition, but in the general society, is that it ebbs and flows with administration,” Raymond said. “Everybody was excited after Dobbs and all that, but it wasn’t anything crazy. I think more people feel like they’re able to speak their views when with a Republican administration, less so with a Democratic administration.”

Raymond said the political landscape at Georgetown and RTL’s club culture reflects these changes.

“I’ve noticed other conservative groups on campus becoming more bold, perhaps with the new administration,” Raymond said.

“The number of freshmen who are interested in joining Right to Life is increasing year by year, and the number of freshmen who stay involved is kind of astounding,” Raymond added.

Scarborough said HFC has faced increased opposition on Georgetown’s campus in recent years and cannot rely on university support.

“We had issues with students that had been yelling things or harassing, and it’s a bit of a bummer not to have university support in those sorts of situations,” Scarborough said.

The abortion debate is still salient, including within the Philonomosian Society, a Georgetown debate club, which hosted a Nov. 5 debate on the subject with nearly 100 students in attendance.

Oliver said the number of students who attended the debate shows increasing interest in discussion around abortion.

“The fact that there were 100 people willing to be in a room with the other side, as it were, and discuss it, is really important,” Oliver said. “You’re seeing that because it’s become such a topic in the nation, because laws are changing, more people are talking about it, which I think is a good thing.”

Keely said that as legal restrictions on abortion have become more prevalent, there has been a cultural shift to emphasize care for the whole person.

“The abortion issue is not just about changing laws,” Keely said. “Ultimately, it’s about people. It’s about making it easier for women to actually support life and have children.”

Brown agreed that reproductive justice meant more than just providing abortion care, but said that federal policies deny many a dignified life.

“People still don’t have the support they need to live healthy and productive lives,” Brown said. “They don’t have access to food. There’s still a housing shortage.”

“Post Dobbs, what we’re seeing is that the United States does not support reproductive justice, does not support families, does not support children, does not support women,” Brown added.

Brown said activists must be realistic about what these policies mean for abortion rights.

“While the arc of the universe bends towards justice, we have to be clear-eyed about the current political context in which we’re living,” Brown said.

Correction: This article was updated on Nov. 17 to correct the context in which a quote was said. This article was also updated Dec. 4 to adjust a modifying phrase.