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Georgia Southern University's Relationships with Pro-Gun Lobby Groups

Submitted by: Scott Beck

4/1/2013

Question:

1) Why does Georgia Southern University (GSU) appear as a "Sustaining Partner" of the pro-gun lobbying group Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation on the CSF webpage?

How long has the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation considered GSU a partner in their efforts?

On an annual basis during the past 15 years, what forms and amounts of support (financial or otherwise) has GSU provided to the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation?

2) Were the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation and/or Lindsey Thomas Consulting in any way involved with the GSU Shooting Center initiative?

If so, how, when, under whose authority, and were they reimbursed in any way?

3) Why did three GSU administrators attend the Shooting Sports Summit in June 2011 in Louisville, KY?

Why was that forum chosen for the first public announcement of the GSU Shooting Center initiative and by whom?

4) Does GSU and/or the Shooting Center initiative already have, in the works, underway, or being considered for the future, partnerships with the CSF, the NSSF, the NRA, USA Shooting, and/or any other pro-gun groups – lobbying, political action, nonprofit, or otherwise?

If so, who initiated and consulted on such partnerships, when, and under whose authority?

Rationale:

A short review of publicly available news, GSU, and internet sources reveals a number of potentially problematic entanglements and conflicts of interest in GSU's relationships with politically active and highly-controversial pro-gun organizations. Many of these groups have actively opposed widely popular, common-sense gun violence control efforts such as requiring mandatory background checks at gun shows, making illegal gun sales a federal crime, and banning high capacity ammunition clips.

1) On their public website, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation lists GSU as a "Sustaining Partner." GSU is the only academic institution so listed. It appears highly inappropriate for a publicly-funded institution of higher education to support a controversial and politically active lobbying group.

2) Also listed as a Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation "Sustaining Partner" is Lindsay Thomas Consulting. Lindsay Thomas, former US Representative from Georgia, is also a member of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation Board of Directors. Mr. Thomas has connections with both GSU and Statesboro.

3) The Shooting Sports Summit is an event organized by the gun industry's own lobbying organization, the National Shooting Sports Foundation. GSU Administrators in attendance at the June 2011 event were: Teresa Thompson, VP Student Affairs & Enrollment Mgt.; Vince Miller, Director, Special Projects; Gene Sherry, Director, Campus Recreation. During the event, National Shooting Sports Foundation's Chief Marketing Officer Chris Dolnack tweeted: "Learned that Georgia Southern University is building a shooting sports center in the heart of their campus. #NSSFSummit."

4) In April 2010, GSU President Keel and GSU Police Chief Russell both publicly stated their well-reasoned intention to continue to ban guns on our campus out of concern for the safety of our university community. Just over a year later, the GSU Shooting Center initiative was announced. According to GSU's Shooting Center website, the center "will have the opportunity to forge partnerships with the NRA [and] USA Shooting." In the wake of the recent December 2012 Newtown, CT school shootings, multiple pro-gun lobby groups, including some of the groups named here, have made provocative and disturbing announcements advocating for unregulated access to guns on educational campuses – contradicting the stated preferences of Keel and Russell.

SOURCES:

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SEC Response

This item was approved for inclusion on the agenda of the April 18 senate meeting. It has been directed to the vice-president for student affairs and to the president's office.

Senate Response

RFI: Georgia Southern University's Relationships with Pro-Gun Lobby Groups

Moderator Mynard noted that this RFI had also garnered a really lengthy answer, this one provided by VP for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management Teresa Thompson.

Robert Pirro (CLASS) noted he had not been on Senate last year, and then asked some questions that Mynard noted had been discussed at that time. He asked Pirro to focus on the issues raised in this current RFI and the response to it. Pirro asked if there has been discussion about possible negative effects that GSU's affiliation with gun proliferation groups will have on recruitment of high achieving students. For example, the Honors Program draws students from 50 states and from several foreign countries as well.

VP Thompson objected to the "characterization of pro-gun"; the Elite Shooting Sports Center is based upon hunting, fishing, all the things that go with elite shooting sports. She did not think there would be a negative connotation put upon it such as the characterization of pro-gun. She noted such facilities exist at Harvard, Yale, and Clemson. So she did not think that high ability students have been scared away.

Robert Costomiris (CLASS) noted that in her response to the RFI she indicated that the Elite Sports Shooting Center is on the outskirts of the campus. He asked her to clarify whether it is on or not on campus. VP Thompson reiterated that it is on "the outskirts of campus." It borders the Bypass; she said "that's outskirts as you can get to our campus."

Costomiris asked if it is campus. VP Thompson said, "It's on our campus; it's the outskirts of campus. On our property. Bordering the Bypass." Costomiris asked if she was saying "guns are going to be on campus." VP Thompson objected that this question had been answered. Moderator Mynard agreed.

Costomiris then noted that her document states that the facility budget is \$7 million. He asked if that had always been the budget, or had it gone up. VP Thompson said that budget was "based upon getting with contractors, Board of Regents, and all those things so that if we wanted to attract Olympic training for archery, there had to be . . . 16 lanes per side. In addition to that, if we offer a rifle team . . . for women . . . for NCAA competition, we would need the 16 lanes for each." Therefore, the budget did increase.

President Keel noted there might also be opportunities down the road to have an outdoor 3D archery range. But that likely won't be part of this project and that will take away a million dollars.

Rob Yarbrough (COSM) asked for an update on the progress of fundraising for this project's budget. VP Thompson said at that point we had a \$3.2 million grant, the city is adding \$500,000, and the University has put in \$1 million because of the women's sports team that has to be a part of that. We have the money to complete the building with 16 lanes on each side. What we did not yet have is funding for final completion of the actual fields. We're short about \$1 million and discussions are going on with different groups who may want to name the fields and those types of things. Yarbrough asked if that \$1 million shortage would hinder building the facility. VP Thompson said no; that money would be for the fields, not the original building. President Keel said we won't turn the fields into an outdoor 3D archery range if somebody doesn't step forward and donate the money. Yarbrough said he asked that question because in the RFI response VP Thompson mentions groups including the NRA and the NSSF. He opined that "the NRA itself and anyone that follows politics would kind of call the NRA a pro-gun group. . . ." VP Thompson agreed. Yarbrough asked if we anticipated going to the NRA or similar groups for the rest of the needed money. VP Thompson said those groups have not indicated any interest in giving to us. Cabela's and Mossy Oaks and others who sell archery equipment are more inclined to contribute. They felt that gun groups don't feel like they have to invest in anything, and they also feel that they've already contributed via the grant because the grant came off of the sales of ammunition and guns.

Tim Teeter (CLASS) noted the response to the RFI says, in part, that this "will be a state-of-the-art venue providing educational and recreation opportunities with its archery and indoor shooting ranges. This project will create a safe, educational environment where people can learn about firearms from trained professionals." He thought he and others questioned whether or not a university is the proper venue for people to be learning about firearms. He did not think this was consistent with the "no guns on campus ethos that we are trying to promote here."

Robert Pirro (CLASS) asked President Keel whether, since during the most recent legislative session we narrowly avoided having a law imposed on us where students, faculty and staff could carry firearms in campus buildings and in classrooms, he had concerns our teaching about guns on campus could be used to say we don't mind guns on campus and in campus buildings. President Keel said no such concerns have been expressed by the System office, the Chancellor, or anyone on the President's Cabinet here. There's been a very clear distinction between guns on campus and a sports

shooting complex. He noted that he personally has “come out as staunchly opposed to having guns in the classroom. So has everyone, all the other 30 Presidents in this System as well as the Chancellor and the Board of Regents. The Board of Regents also unanimously approved this facility on this campus and are very, very excited about what it represents from the sports shooting side of things, so the Regents don’t appear to have any issue with being able to distinguish between the two . . . and I don’t believe that this community will either.”

Robert Costomiris (CLASS) asked VP Thompson if, since the facility is now going to be larger than originally proposed, the projected operating budget has also grown. VP Thompson said we could bring that back to look at. With an additional 8 archery lanes, there will be more air conditioning, and that type thing for a larger facility, but that’s about it. The same holds on the shooting side; because the state-of-the-art had to be where you don’t touch the lead, they already had an exhaust system, and so you’re just adding. We had to buy the system initially for the 8, and so the 16 is just an addition. Costomiris asked if it is not the case that for every certain number of lanes you need a supervising shooting person.

Moderator Mynard said this went beyond the scope of the current RFI and invited Costomiris to file an RFI specifically on the budget aspect.

Robert Pirro (CLASS) asked President Keel if there had been discussions about how to respond to an uptick in accidental discharges of firearms on campus, given the presence of firearms on campus at the shooting center. President Keel did not respond because Moderator Mynard said this, too, went beyond the scope of the current RFI.

Other Response Update 04/15/13: the following answers were provided by Teresa Thompson, Vice-president for student affairs and Enrollment Management ([see attached word file](#)): Georgia Southern University is on record as being adamantly opposed to guns in the classroom. Our institution does not support the proposed campus carry legislation. Our position on people carrying firearms across campus and into classrooms has not changed. In 2010, the legislature modified the law which allowed concealed carry, licensed gun-holders to keep their weapons in their vehicles in the parking lots of our campus. We believe the law in its current form is working and is the best and most effective way to protect and ensure the safety of students, faculty and staff.

We are proud and excited to have an elite sports shooting education center coming to Georgia Southern and Statesboro. A facility of this nature does not contradict the University's position on guns in the classroom. This center, which will be located on the outskirts of campus, is an opportunity to educate, teach and train people on

responsible gun ownership and promote the growing popularity of recreational sports shooting.

The \$7 million facility, funded in part by a \$3.3 million federal grant through the Georgia Department of Natural Resources along with private and corporate donations, will be a state-of-the-art venue providing educational and recreation opportunities with its archery and indoor shooting ranges. This project will create a safe, educational environment where people can learn about firearms from trained professionals.

Questions:

1) Why does Georgia Southern University (GSU) appear as a "Sustaining Partner" of the pro-gun lobbying group Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation on the CSF Webpage?

Georgia Southern University representatives - Dr. Vince Miller, associate vice president and Gene Sherry, exec. director of campus recreation - attended the Congressional Sportsman Foundation banquet in Washington, DC in December 2012 as an opportunity to meet industry executives for further cultivation as fundraising prospects. This event allowed access to top executives from such entities as UPS, Rayonier, Honda Motors, Outdoor Channel, Bass Pro Shops, etc. which would be difficult to contact on an individual basis.

How long has the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation considered GSU a partner in their efforts? To our knowledge, only after representatives attending this event did Georgia Southern's name appear.

On an annual basis during the past 15 years, what forms and amounts of support (financial or otherwise) has GSU provided to the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation? Just the December 2012 event attendance and costs associated with travel and participation in that one event.

2) Were the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation and/or Lindsey Thomas Consulting in any way involved with the GSU Shooting Center initiative?

If so, how, when, under whose authority, and were they reimbursed in any way?

No additional relationship with the Congressional Sportsmen Foundation exists beyond what is stated in response to question 1. Hon. Lindsey Thomas is a Georgia Southern supporter who expressed his enthusiasm for the project once it was announced in early 2012. Lindsey Thomas Consulting has not and is not under contract with the University for services in support of this project. He has not been compensated in any way associated with this project.

3) Why did three GSU administrators attend the Shooting Sports Summit in June 2011 in Louisville, KY? Attendance at this event was part of an industry fact finding process surrounding the early stages of this project. GSU administrators have also attended similar summit with the Archery Trade Association, conducted site visits of similar facilities in Michigan and Gainesville, Florida; and participated regional and statewide drive-ins with DNR.

Why was that forum chosen for the first public announcement of the GSU Shooting Center initiative and by whom? Similar interests as to why a University was in attendance began to cascade across the Summit participants and we shared our project with those who asked. This generated excitement around this concept possibly led to the tweet by Chis Dolnac.

4) Does GSU and/or the Shooting Center initiative already have, in the works, underway, or being considered for the future, partnerships with the CSF, the NSSF, the NRA, USA Shooting, and/or any other pro-gun groups – lobbying, political action, non-profit, or otherwise? If so, who initiated and consulted on such partnerships, when, and under whose authority? CSF, NRA, and USA shooting have not provided financial support or partnership. Georgia Southern has received a \$25,000 award from the NSSF Grant program. This is an unrestricted award to support administrative costs associated with constructing the facility. The award is part of the Collegiate Shooting Sports Initiative. Schools that have received CSSI grants include Harvard, Yale, Clemson, Colorado State, and The University of Vermont.

At this time, all possibilities are open for exploration. The NSSF, NRA, USA Shooting, in addition to Archery Trade Association, DNR, Easton Sports, Midway, and many others have programs which support recreation and shooting sports. Georgia Southern students and the community are already exposed to such programs in their high schools and recreation and have asked for expanded recreation in this area. Our partnerships will be strategic in support of the Mission of the facility and Georgia Southern and are not intended as political alliances or statements on behalf of the institution.

As stated in all other discussions, GSU will continue to abide and uphold all regulations for guns not being allowed on campus except at the Shooting Sports Complex.