

Administration decides to affiliate with WRC

By [Zach Werner](#)

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Administrators agreed last Friday to affiliate the University with the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a nonprofit organization that monitors working conditions in factories that produce clothing and other merchandise bearing school names and logos.

The decision comes as a big victory for Students Organized and United with Labor (SOUL), the RSO that has long advocated the Consortium. Leading up to the decision, SOUL had mounted a campaign to convince the University to join the other 135 schools that have already affiliated themselves with the WRC. This was their second campaign to have the University join the WRC; an earlier attempt in 2000 was rejected.

SOUL's efforts are a culmination of more than a year's worth of work petitioning other students and RSOs since the winter of 2004. After petitioning Bill Michel, the assistant vice president for student life, SOUL arranged a meeting on February 25 with University administrators regarding the importance of the WRC.

SOUL member Miranda Nelson, a second-year in the College, said it was important for colleges to join the WRC because it has succeeded in making factories adhere to established standards for working conditions and reducing sweatshop conditions. "By joining the WRC, the University will be able to get far more detailed information about its vendors, as the WRC releases comprehensive public reports," she said. "The WRC has shown itself to be able to hold licensees to the standards of various University Codes of Conduct."

The University is already a member of the Fair Labor Association (FLA) through its partnership with Barnes & Noble bookstores, which has a Code of Conduct that University licensees are required to follow. However, according to Nelson, the FLA has been notoriously bad at enforcing these codes, and the WRC has often intervened on its behalf.

"We wanted the University to be part of an effective monitoring body, so that the vendors in our stores would actually follow the Code of Conduct we are supposedly holding them

to, via the FLA,” Nelson said. “By joining the WRC, the University will be able to get far more detailed information about its vendors, as the WRC releases comprehensive public reports, something the FLA does not. Also, the WRC does a better job in each factory it investigates, getting much more complete information. And finally, the WRC has shown itself to be able to hold licensees to the standards of various University Codes of Conduct.”

As a WRC affiliate, the University’s licensing contracts with clothing companies will incorporate the Consortium’s official code. In turn, the companies must then supply the WRC with a list of their factories and their respective locations.

Steve Klass, vice president and dean of students at the University, and one of the administrators who met with SOUL last February, said affiliation with the WRC was in compliance with the University’s licensing program, which protects its name and emblems on merchandise.

“As a part of [the WRC] we’ve always wanted to take reasonable due diligence to make sure our vendors know that workplace conditions are very important to us,” Klass said. “As told to these students, that is the code of conduct that we will adopt for our own. The students convinced us and through our own analysis that the WRC was additionally effective in monitoring workplace conditions and working with factories to ameliorate conditions workers felt were substandard. We felt this was an opportunity to add to our own capabilities in this case.”

The WRC investigates conditions in the factories used by each school’s clothing vendors. According to its mission statement, the WRC reports its findings back to the general public and its member colleges and universities. “Where violations are uncovered, the WRC works with colleges and universities, U.S.-based retail corporations and local workers and organizations to correct the problem and improve conditions.”

Despite the altruistic intentions of the WRC, however, some experts fear the organization does more harm than good to those it intends to help. Allen Sanderson, a senior lecturer of economics in the College, said the movement for better working conditions could potentially decrease jobs and business in developing economies. “One has to look at what’s the feasible alternative,” he said. “Poverty is not without its disadvantages. In low-income countries, if businesses pick up and leave because of protests, then the students are not doing workers any favors. The alternatives are far worse if they’re not working for American apparel companies.”

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