

Haffner to resign sex-education post to pursue studies

Group opposed abstinence lessons

By Cheryl Wetzstein
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The president of the nation's top advocacy group for sex education is resigning next month to pursue her religious studies, the group announced yesterday.

A search for Debra W. Haffner's replacement is underway, said a spokeswoman for the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), based in New York City.

She "has helped raise the standard for high-quality comprehensive sexuality education for adults and children of all ages," Wayne Shields, president of the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals, said yesterday.

"Debra leaves a real legacy," said James Wagoner, president of Advocates for Youth, who praised Ms. Haffner as "an excellent strategist, superb communicator and a trailblazer in terms of normalizing adolescent sexual health in American society."

Under Ms. Haffner's leadership, he said, the council "moved from an academic organization to a high-impact social-change organization."

"I think the board will be very committed to find a new leader who can maintain that momentum," said Mr. Wagoner.

Critics also did not expect that a leadership change would affect the agenda of the council, which was founded in 1964 by Mary S. Calderone to promote sexuality education and individual sexual rights. The group has lately been a vocal opponent of abstinence-only education.

"SIECUS is bigger than one person because [it] is about an ideology," said Janet Parshall, a Family Research Council official who

has described the council as "the vehicle of discredited sex researcher Alfred Kinsey."

Its world view basically says, "if it feels good, do it, and we'll help facilitate that decision," said Mrs. Parshall. This is why they support sex education over abstinence-only education, she added. "If kids become sexually abstinent, SIECUS is out of business."

"We wish her well," said Rita Thompson of Concerned Women for America, which has also tangled with the council on sexuality issues.

"But I think Debra missed it when she didn't promote abstinence-only education," she added. "That's the more responsible way we should be training up our children in the educational arena."

Ms. Haffner said yesterday that her May 31 departure was long planned, and that "nobody should run a nonprofit forever."

"I feel that in the last 12 years, America has grown up sexually, and I'm very proud of the work we've done to advance sexuality education for people of all ages in this country," she said. "And I feel very much that I'm being called to do work on sexuality but with a religious audience."

Ms. Haffner said she is currently attending Union Theological Seminary and is a candidate for the ministry in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The council credited Ms. Haffner, a former Planned Parenthood educator, with attracting more than \$15 million and expanding the group's published papers. She also helped develop guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education for kindergarten through 12th grade that are viewed as "state of the art" sex-education guidelines, said Mr. Wagoner.