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UNC-CH criticized for letter to Christian group

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CHAPEL HILL -- A national civil liberties group has criticized UNC-Chapel Hill after the university informed a Christian student group that it could not require its leaders to subscribe to Christian beliefs.

A UNC-CH administrator told the campus InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in a letter Dec. 10 that its charter violates the university's nondiscrimination policy for student organizations because it requires its officers to adhere to Christian doctrines. Jonathan E. Curtis, the UNC-CH Student Union assistant director for student activities and organizations, told the group it would lose official recognition and funding unless it amends its charter by Jan. 31.

Scott Vermillion, staff director for the four UNC-CH chapters of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, said the group has no intention of discriminating. "We're saying, 'If you're going to be a leader of this organization, you need to believe in what this organization stands for,'" Vermillion said Monday. "We're not trying to keep anybody out. We're just trying to keep InterVarsity InterVarsity."

The group's UNC-CH chapters have about 325 undergraduate and graduate student members. Vermillion said they aren't trying to stir up controversy, but they will fight for their rights.

"We're not a belligerent group, but we do want access to campus and to funding," Vermillion said. "This group of students ought not be denied funding when we have been here 52 years."

In his letter, Curtis said the group's charter contradicted its pledge to abide by a university requirement that student groups grant "openness to full membership and participation ... without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, disability, age, veteran status, sexual orientation, or gender (where applicable)."

His letter drew the attention of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a civil liberties group in Philadelphia that filed suit Monday against Rutgers University in federal court in New Jersey. Rutgers recently cut funding to an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship chapter there. FIRE officials said they were prepared to take UNC-CH to court because it is violating students' freedom of association, freedom of expression and free exercise of religion.

Such a lawsuit would be the second major legal attack in a year against UNC-CH on the basis of religious freedom. This summer, the university fought a conservative Christian group over the right to require incoming freshmen to read a book about the Quran, the Muslim holy book. The brouhaha put

UNC in the national spotlight.

Thor Halvorssen, chief executive officer of FIRE, said the current dispute at UNC-CH was a "slam-dunk First Amendment case."

"That letter is chilling," Halvorssen said of UNC-CH's communication of Dec. 10 to InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. "That letter is basically saying to a Christian group: 'You can't be Christian.' "

Curtis could not be reached for comment. Dean L. Bresciani, UNC-CH interim vice chancellor for student affairs, said the university would work with InterVarsity to resolve the dispute.

"We have no intention of kicking the group off campus, and we're prepared to work very hard to avoid that scenario," Bresciani said Monday.

Bresciani said the letter came about after Rutgers officials asked UNC-CH how it had handled InterVarsity's charter. After some investigation, UNC-CH officials realized that although the group signed the university's nondiscrimination statement and allowed anyone to join, its charter specified that leaders had to subscribe to Christian beliefs. That practice complies with the national InterVarsity charter.

Bresciani said he planned to meet again with the group's representatives in January. "We're feeling confident we can find some solution," he said. "We just have to find a way to get around the legal hurdle."

FIRE is a nonprofit organization that has intervened over the past year in a number of free-speech issues on U.S. campuses. The organization supported a Harvard newspaper that was rebuked for an editorial cartoon critical of the campus career service office. It criticized "free speech zones" that restricted students who picketed corporate recruiters at West Virginia University and protested U.S. foreign policy at Appalachian State University. And it sided with anti-abortion groups that accused several universities of unfairly restricting their ability to organize students and express their views.

In a letter Dec. 27 to UNC-CH Chancellor James Moeser, Halvorssen cited the controversy over the university's summer reading program.

"The InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has as much right to freedom of expression as the conveners of the discussions of the Koran at UNC-Chapel Hill had to their First Amendment rights," Halvorssen wrote. "You rightly made a national issue of the First Amendment at UNC-Chapel Hill in that latter instance; we promise you that, effective immediately, we shall make a national issue of the First Amendment at UNC-Chapel Hill in the matter of the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. We will do this for all groups denied their fundamental rights at Chapel Hill."