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AP UPDATE (12:31 P.M.)

InterVarsity's insistence on conservative Christian student leaders runs afoul of colleges' policies

Campus Christian group is in Bloomington

By **Richard N. Ostling**
Associated Press

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After 65 years of work on American college campuses, the respected InterVarsity Christian Fellowship has been battling recently with administrators at several dozen schools.

At issue are university rules that forbid recognized on-campus student organizations from discriminating on the basis of religion or of sexual orientation.

InterVarsity believes students who lead its chapters - though not the other participants - should adhere to its eight-point doctrinal platform, and the traditional Christian teaching against same-sex behavior.

"A person's religious convictions are a relevant factor when selecting him or her to lead a religious organization," undergraduate leaders of an independent but InterVarsity-related Christian fellowship at Harvard said in a recent statement. The issue is under discussion there.

InterVarsity seeks to settle such disputes privately, says the group's attorney, David French. It almost always wins, defending its

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policies on the basis of religious freedom, says French, whose efforts are supported by the Alliance Defense Fund of Scottsdale, Ariz.

But at Rutgers University, a local chapter was suspended in September, subsequent talks stalled and InterVarsity filed suit in federal court for the first time anywhere Dec. 30.

The same day, news broke that Chancellor James Moeser of the University of North Carolina overruled the student activities director, who had told InterVarsity students to drop their leadership restrictions by Jan. 31 or be thrown off campus.

North Carolina's rules, similar to those elsewhere, require campus clubs to allow "full membership and participation" without regard to religion, sexual orientation or other factors.

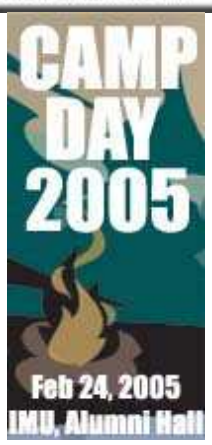
Moeser decided InterVarsity could continue as a recognized campus club without changing its rule on leaders. Because it makes "valuable contributions to student life" and since membership is open to all, "on balance," Moeser explained, "preserving freedom of expression is the more crucial consideration."

Originating at England's University of Cambridge 126 years ago, InterVarsity reached the University of Michigan in 1938 and currently has chapters on 560 U.S. campuses.

Its missionary convention at the University of Illinois every three years is the biggest religious event in America for college students; it drew 18,730 in 2000.

Yet deeply religious students tend to find themselves marginalized on campus, says Alan Charles Kors, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. They wind up as the only group expected to live with "a hostile environment," he said.

Kors, a University of Pennsylvania historian and nonreligious Jew, thinks such students should insist on their rights, as InterVarsity is doing. "A large number don't fight back," he said.



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Apparently, college religious organizations often avoid conflict by operating off-campus - or by simply winking at campus rules. But French said "integrity" requires InterVarsity chapters to state their leadership policies.

For many years, there seemed to be no problem. The pressures on InterVarsity first became public at Tufts University in 2000, when a member filed a complaint that student leaders of the local chapter barred her from holding office because she is a lesbian who disagreed with InterVarsity's view of homosexual activity.

Eventually the campus judiciary decided the lesbian had been discriminated against, but InterVarsity's policy did not violate Tufts rules so it could continue operating.

French believes public universities like Rutgers are bound by U.S. Supreme Court decisions that guarantee religious clubs equal access to campus facilities and funding from mandatory student activity fees. In addition, the court has backed the right of private associations - in a Boy Scouts case - to select leaders on the basis of moral tenets.

The Rutgers dispute pits adherence to InterVarsity's doctrinal requirements against the university rule that "membership, benefits and the election of officers" will not be made on the basis of "religious affiliation."

The InterVarsity chapter could operate off-campus like many religious ministries do, admits InterVarsity staff adviser Laura Vellenga.

But she said that would relegate it to "second-class status," losing guaranteed access to campus facilities and a rightful share of student activities fees.

Emmet A. Dennis, Rutgers' vice president for student affairs, said Monday that the school believes a group receiving student fees should open leadership posts to any active participant.

He sees InterVarsity as a national organization seeking to veto local leaders by insisting on its doctrinal standards, although Vellenga says the

Rutgers students themselves want to make sure like-minded Christians continue to lead the group.

The issue is simply the right of assembly and "whether groups can come together under particular beliefs," according to Jonathan Crowe, who was student co-leader of the InterVarsity chapter during the Tufts University dispute.

"If you take that away, forcing a Republican group to have a Democratic president or a Hillel group to have a Holocaust denier, you're undermining the integrity of the group."

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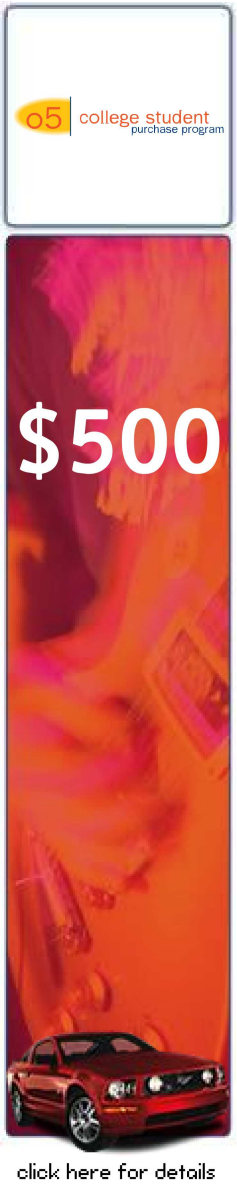

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