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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Today's News

Monday, October 23, 2000

Tufts U. Christian Group, Accused of Anti-Gay Bias, Is Placed on Probation

By [COURTNEY LEATHERMAN](#)

A Tufts University judicial board has decided to place a Christian student group on probation for discriminating against a lesbian student who was denied a leadership position in the group. The board found that the group had discriminated against the woman because of her sexual orientation, but supporters of the group say it is being denied the right to free association.

In April, the Tufts Community Union Judiciary stripped the Tufts Christian Fellowship of its campus financial support after the student, Julie Catalano, charged that it discriminates against gay people. But in May, the Christian group was welcomed back after another student committee found that the judicial committee had violated its own procedures in handling the case. While this was going on, the case gained nationwide attention, with some civil libertarians and religious groups backing the Christian group, and gay organizations and other civil libertarians backing Ms. Catalano. (See an [article from *The Chronicle*](#), May 26.)

This time, in a confusing four-page ruling, the judicial committee found that the Christian group had discriminated against Ms. Catalano on the basis of sexual orientation. The panel noted that the Christian group had double standards for gay and heterosexual students who sought leadership posts. The panel said that the group had allowed a heterosexual student to serve as a leader even though the student had not necessarily considered gay sex to be a sin. The judicial panel said that this information undermined the defense put forward last spring by the Christian group. It said then it had denied Ms. Catalano a leadership post not because she was gay but because she did believe that homosexuality was not a sin.

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The judicial panel put the group on probation until the end of the academic term and gave the group 14 days to redraft its constitution to comply with the university's nondiscrimination policy. The panel said that the group's double standard violated that policy.

Neither side was pleased with the panel's decision.

Judith Brown, director of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Center at Tufts, thought that the judicial panel let the Christian group off easy. "I was hoping to see a less confusing and more clear indictment of discrimination," she said. She said she also believed that since the panel found that the group had discriminated, the group should have lost its recognition immediately.

Thor L. Halvorssen, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights, said that by standing by the judicial panel's decision, Tufts "wants to have it both ways. They want to say to donors and trustees and all who care about religious freedom that they allowed the group to exist and that they are not about to ban evangelical students from campus. At the same time, they want to appear to students that they are still P.C."

Mr. Halvorssen said that he hoped the Christian fellowship would not change its constitution. "We are adamantly opposed to the university establishing a loyalty oath that these students must mouth that strikes at voluntary association."

He vowed that if the group refused to adopt the university's nondiscrimination clause and was then kicked off the campus that FIRE would be right back in there fighting.



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