

News & Observer

Moeser upholds Christian group's status UNC-CH club OK to continue

January 1, 2003

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CHAPEL HILL -- UNC-Chapel Hill Chancellor James Moeser on Tuesday ordered the university to allow the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship to continue as an officially recognized student organization, despite a letter last month that threatened the group's status on campus. Moeser said that the university had been trying to uphold anti-discrimination laws during a recent review of the charters of all student groups. InterVarsity is open to all students, but its charter requires its leaders to uphold the doctrines of the Christian faith, which raised a concern among university administrators.

Late Tuesday, university leaders decided that InterVarsity students' freedom of expression was equally important.

"The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill values its long relationship with the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and the valuable contributions to student life and campus leadership that the IVCF has made in its many years here," Moeser said in a statement. "I want to preserve that relationship, and I pledge to do all I can to support the IVCF and its values."

A letter Dec. 10 from a student union administrator to InterVarsity told the group to change its charter by Jan. 31 or face revocation of its official recognition -- and, therefore, lose access to university facilities and funding. The university's nondiscrimination clause requires student groups to grant "openness to full membership and participation ... without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, disability, age, veteran status, sexual orientation, or gender."

In allowing the group's recognition to continue, Moeser said the university is trying to strike a balance.

"This is not a simple matter," he said. "While the university continues to seek to ensure that our facilities and resources are not used in any way that fosters illegal discrimination, we also wish to uphold the principles of freedom of expression."

Student leaders of InterVarsity must sign an eight-paragraph statement of belief, which includes many of the tenets common to most evangelical Christians. Those include belief in the Trinity, the sacrificial death of Jesus and the promise of eternal life. Student leaders said they had never heard of anyone who declined to sign.

"It's the same things I've believed in before I came to school," said Rebecca Perry, a senior in clinical

laboratory science and the former small-group coordinator for the fellowship. "If you care enough about the organization to be a leader, you already believe this."

InterVarsity's representatives say the group receives about \$1,000 a year from the university -- money the school collects from each student as part of the "student activity fee" that is part of the overall tuition package. Official recognition allows the fellowship to reserve meeting rooms on campus. The group does not have office or worship space, like some other religious organizations on campus. Its student leaders and five full-time staff members work from their dorms or their homes.

InterVarsity, an interdenominational group, has been on the UNC-CH campus for 52 years. It has three undergraduate chapters and one graduate chapter with about 325 student members in all.

"We feel like we're an upstanding member of the community," said Scott Vermillion, InterVarsity's staff director. "We're trying to protect a sense of who we are. We understand that the university is pluralistic. We're just asking that we be who we want to be."

UNC-CH's letter Dec. 10 to InterVarsity led a national civil liberties group to write to Moeser, saying the policy would deny students freedom of expression and freedom of religion. The group, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, has supported a federal lawsuit filed this week by the fellowship against Rutgers University in New Jersey. In that case, InterVarsity sued Rutgers after the university stripped the student group of funding and access to university buildings.

The lawsuit against Rutgers is the first such action by the fellowship, but by no means its first controversy.

The fellowship has been fighting legal battles at college campuses for several years, so much so that it has its own "Religious Freedom Crisis Team" -- which is, in effect, a one-man project by attorney David French of Lexington, Ky. French has represented InterVarsity for the past three years in about 20 legal skirmishes on campuses around the country.

French said the constitutional principles of freedom of association, freedom of religion and free expression must override a university's diversity interests.

"There's a blind application of these diversity policies," he said.

The Supreme Court has ruled that universities must give Christian groups equal access to facilities and funds that any student group would have. But banning a Christian group from operating on its own religious principles, French said, would undercut that equal access.

"It has the effect of devastating a religious group's autonomy," he said.