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UNC-CH says Christian group can remain official organization

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A Christian group at UNC-Chapel Hill can remain an official student organization despite a dispute over the group's leadership requirements, Chancellor James Moeser said Tuesday.

An administrator at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill told InterVarsity Christian Fellowship leaders on Dec. 10 that its charter violates the school's nondiscrimination policy for student organizations because it requires its officers to adhere to Christian doctrines.

An IVCF leader said the evangelical group has no intention of discriminating but wants to retain its religious identity. Moeser said in a news release that IVCF, which has been working at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for more than 50 years, has made "valuable contributions to student life and campus leadership."

"On balance, given that general membership in IVCF is open to all students, I believe that in this matter, preserving freedom of expression is the more crucial consideration," Moeser said. "Thus I have asked our staff to allow IVCF to continue to operate as an official recognized student organization."

Jonathan Curtis, the UNC-CH Student Union assistant director for student activities and organizations, told the group in a letter it would lose official recognition and financing unless it amends its charter by Jan. 31.

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 sued Rutgers University on Monday in federal court in New Jersey. Rutgers recently cut financing 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.

Moeser said Tuesday his school has made similar requests to a number of student groups that wanted to use university buildings or money from student fees but excluded some persons from membership.

The school still wants to ensure that its resources aren't used in any way to foster illegal discrimination,

Moeser said. A university official planned to meet again with the group's representatives in January.

"I believe we can strike a balance here - one that is fair and legal," Moeser said.

The group's UNC-CH chapters have about 325 undergraduate and graduate student members.

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. "We're not trying to keep anybody out. We're just trying to keep InterVarsity InterVarsity."

Any lawsuit would be the second major legal attack in a year against UNC-CH on religious freedom grounds. 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. A federal appeals court ruled in favor of the university hours before sessions discussing the book were to begin.

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 Curtis' letter. "That letter is basically saying to a Christian group: 'You can't be Christian.'"