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UNC allows InterVarsity to remain Moeser: Fellowship's general membership is open to all

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CHAPEL HILL - UNC Chancellor James Moeser has decided to allow the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship to continue to operate as an official recognized student organization, although the group requires its leadership to follow the Christian faith.

"I'm excited and pleased about his decision," said Scott Vermillion, InterVarsity's area director at UNC. "I haven't heard from him personally, but I feel like he's made a good decision and we're excited about it."

In a written statement to news media, Moeser said the issue was not simple. "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," the chancellor said.

"On balance, given that the general membership in the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship 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."

Controversy arose this week about the Christian student organization because its charter requires its leadership to sign a statement pledging a belief in Christianity. UNC officials told leaders of the group to change that language or lose its status as a university-affiliated organization and thus its main source of funding. The officials contended that the language discriminated against students of other faiths, thus violating anti-discrimination laws.

The issue was sparked earlier this year when officials at Rutgers University, who were dealing with the question, asked UNC how it handled the situation.

UNC officials looked at the group's charter and sent letters to the group mandating a change. Mandatory student fees support clubs and groups on campus, and school officials feared that they couldn't require students to pay the fees if they couldn't be full members of a student club or group.

Since anyone can join one of the three groups that compose the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship,

Moeser decided that it was important to uphold freedom of expression, according to his statement.

The InterVarsity group has been operating on the UNC campus for 52 years and always has required its leadership to pledge belief in Christianity, Vermillion said. "We've had the same requirements for leaders through the years," he said.

Moeser said there was a mistaken impression that UNC staff targeted only Christian groups on campus. "The fact is, university officials made the same request of a number of student groups that wanted to use university facilities or funds generated from student fees but excluded persons from membership and full participation based on race, gender or religious belief," the chancellor said.

"At issue here is the law, which requires that charters of officially recognized student groups at public universities not exclude persons from membership and full participation based on race, gender or religious belief," Moeser said. "Carolina has worked to comply with that law, and doing so has asked all recognized student groups to make sure their charters do just that."

Seventeen campus groups, including 11 religious student groups, had problems with their charters, but only InterVarsity had failed to make appropriate changes, said Dean Bresciani, UNC's interim vice chancellor for student affairs, on Tuesday.

That day, the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education threatened to make a national issue of First Amendment rights of InterVarsity if the university didn't drop its demand for the student group to change its charter.

"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.

"I want to preserve that relationship, and I pledge to do all I can to support the IVCF and its values. To that I have directed that IVCF be allowed to continue to operate as a recognized student organization," he said.