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Tufts U. Christian Group Reprieved

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SUMMARY: The decision to "derecognize" a campus group for its failure to allow a bisexual to serve as a leader has been overturned on procedural grounds.

A Tufts University campus Christian group "derecognized" by the student government last month for denying a bisexual student a leadership role has won a reprieve from an appeals panel, pending reconsideration of the matter in the new school year. The conflict between a campus religious group and the private school's non-discrimination policy has captured national attention not because it's the first of its kind but because similar situations are arising at a growing number of colleges and universities. At Tufts thus far, despite the threat of a lawsuit, the university administration has stood aside from what it views as a student issue.

On the Tufts campus in Medford, Massachusetts, the story began with Julie Catalano, a United Church of Christ member with ambitions to attend divinity school who was quite open with the Tufts Christian Fellowship about her bisexual orientation from the time she joined as a freshman. Advised that prayer could make her heterosexual, she spent more than two years praying, without success. After contemplating suicide, she decided her orientation was neither changeable nor sinful. In March, she sought a role as a leader in the group for her upcoming senior year and was told she could not, although she was welcome to remain an active member of the group.

Catalano complained to the Tufts Community Union Judiciary, which decided April 13 that the Christian Fellowship was discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation in violation of campus policy. The Judiciary decided to "derecognize" the group, ending its annual grant of nearly \$6,000 from student fees, its right to use "Tufts" in its name, and its priority in reserving meeting space on campus; the ruling also limits the Fellowship's ability to promote events through school channels.

The Fellowship appealed to the Committee on Student Life, a twelve-member student-faculty panel with a faculty majority. That group ruled unanimously on May 15 that the Judiciary had erred by failing to

hold a hearing before reaching its decision. According to one report, the Judiciary made its decision at a late-night meeting the Fellowship wasn't told about. The Committee on Student Life did not criticize the conclusion the Judiciary had reached, only its process, and the Committee recommended the Judiciary reconsider the issue. That will have to be in the new school year, after a new Judiciary has been elected a few months from now.

In the interim, though, the Committee has reinstated the Fellowship's campus privileges. That's particularly valuable to the group because it will have access to campus communications to recruit new students at the beginning of the school year, whatever the final outcome of the controversy may be.

As the Fellowship describes it, it is not actually Catalano's sexual orientation but "her religious beliefs about sexual practice and her interpretation of Scripture on this issue" [the sinfulness of homosexual activity] that precludes her playing a leadership role; at least according to one Judiciary member, the Fellowship has said it would deny a leadership position to a heterosexual who held the same belief. Although the group's 65 - 70 members come from various protestant denominations and Catholicism, apparently it is firmly centered on a belief that any sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage violates Biblical prescriptions. One analogy their defenders have used to describe the situation would be requiring a group of scientists to accept as a leader someone who believes the earth is flat (although some may prefer to compare it to requiring a group of artists to accept a sculptor rather than a painter). The group has further said that it does not oppose equal treatment of gays and lesbians in other contexts, and welcomes them into its membership as it does all others.

As the Tufts Transgender, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Collective sees it, the Fellowship discriminates against gays and lesbians in leadership, and even though the Fellowship's position may be based in religious belief, the group should not be receiving student funds. In an ad in the campus newspaper *Tufts Daily*, more than 25 individuals and groups on campus signed a letter from Catalano in support of the non-discrimination policy. Catalano herself has said, "I'm not challenging their right to hold their beliefs, nor am I challenging their freedom of association, but I don't think pulling their recognition or funding violates either of those constitutional rights. They can still hold their beliefs and hold their meetings, but Tufts has a right to say, 'No, we will not fund you because you're in violation of university policy.'"

Although Fellowship supporters used the language of oppressed minorities in reacting to the original Judiciary ruling, including claims that the university was cutting off diversity by demanding uniformity of thought, the alleged underdog is receiving considerable support. To begin with, it is sponsored by a large evangelical national campus ministry, [InterVarsity Christian Fellowship](#). More than 150 academics from around the U.S. signed a letter of protest to the school administration. Then the Philadelphia-based anti-"political correctness" [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#) (FIRE) jumped in to act as a media advocate and to organize a campaign of support. FIRE executive director Thor Halvorssen told WorldNetDaily.com after the May 15 ruling he was "relieved that the [Tufts Christian Fellowship] does not have to seek shelter in catacombs beneath the Tufts campus."

The Washington, DC-based [Ethics and Public Policy Center](#)'s president Elliot Abrams (key figure in the Reagan administration's Iran-Contra scandal, whom one Senate committeemember once said he would not trust any further than he could throw Oliver North) also spoke up in defense of the group.

Cornell University law professor David French quickly volunteered to represent the group in a lawsuit without compensation.

Grinnell College in Iowa is believed to be the first school in the U.S. to cut off recognition and funding for a campus Christian group for restricting its leadership to those who believe only married heterosexual couples should have sex, having done so in 1997; that group is seeking reinstatement. Other campuses where related debates are currently in progress include Middlebury College in Vermont, Williams College in Massachusetts, Whitman College in Washington, and Ball State University in Indiana.

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