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Tufts lifts its ban on Christian group

By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff, 5/17/2000

Tufts University has reversed its ban of an evangelical Christian student group that refused to allow a lesbian to hold a leadership post.

Monday's decision, which could be reassessed next fall, reversed a decision by student government that banned the evangelical group from using the university's name, meeting in classrooms, sharing in student activity fees, or promoting its events through school listings.

The ban has reverberated at private colleges across the country. An increasing number of private schools are grappling with conflicting impulses to protect religious freedom and fight discrimination against gays and lesbians.

In New England, Middlebury and Williams colleges are now debating the posture of evangelical Christian groups toward gays and lesbians. Similar debates are underway at Ball State University in Indiana, Grinnell College in Iowa, and Whitman College in Washington state.

Evangelical Christians generally argue that they do not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, but that they will not allow students to hold leadership posts unless they agree that sexual activity should be enjoyed only by married heterosexual adults. Gay students argue that the evangelical position is discriminatory and that student funds should not be used to support any organization that discriminates, even if discrimination is based on religious

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beliefs.

At Tufts, the student-faculty Committee on Student Life voted unanimously Monday to reinstate the Tufts Christian Fellowship, which last month lost its recognition as a student group under a decision by an arm of student government, the Tufts Community Union Judiciary.

On Monday, the Committee on Student Life ruled that the student judiciary violated due process rights of the evangelical Christians by not holding a hearing before issuing its decision. The committee recommended that the student judiciary hold another hearing, presumably in the fall when students return.

The Tufts administration downplayed the importance of this week's development.

"This is far from over," said university spokeswoman Christen Graham. "It's definitely going to come up again, and the issue of discrimination is still unresolved."

Advocates of gay rights said they do not expect to let the matter drop.

"We will not leave this matter behind," said Judith Brown, director of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center at Tufts. "Student groups should have to abide by the university's nondiscrimination policy."

Advocates for the evangelical Christians say they believe the notion of banning their group is dead.

"I do not expect them to try to ban us once again," said Curtis Chang, an affiliate chaplain who advises evangelical students at Tufts. Chang said the timing of the decision, during the last week before graduation, was critical, because it will allow the Tufts Christian Fellowship to promote itself to incoming freshmen next fall.

"This is a victory, not just for us, but for Tufts," Chang said. "It means that Tufts is really open to all religious groups, including Christians, and we feel like that's to Tufts' benefit."

At public universities, lawyers say, constitutional protections would clearly protect the rights of religious groups such as the evangelical students to choose their own leaders and use student activity fees. But the legal ground is murkier at private colleges, they say.

The actions at Tufts have provoked intense debate in the academic community. More than 150 academics from around the country sent a letter to Tufts protesting the decision to ban the evangelical student group, and a variety of students and

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faculty from around the country have debated the issues on the Internet.

Thor L. Halvorssen, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said the Tufts situation has emboldened evangelical students to fight back, rather than allow themselves to be kicked off campus, as apparently happened at Grinnell several years ago.

David A. French, a Cornell University law professor representing the Tufts evangelicals, said he hopes that in the next few months the religious group and Tufts administrators can negotiate a compromise.

"Now the Tufts Christian Fellowship and the university can begin a process of thinking soberly about these issues ... and hopefully we could work out a model for other universities," French said.

This story ran on page B3 of the Boston Globe on 5/17/2000.

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