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IRCC defends not screening 'Passion'

The college says all R-rated movies are banned; a Christian student club counters that the policy is inconsistent and their rights were violated.

By Ana X. Ceron
 staff writer
January 18, 2005

FORT PIERCE — Today, officials at Indian River Community College will announce a review of their policies on student organizations and events after a Christian club complained to a national academic-freedom watchdog group that the college had stepped on its constitutional rights.

Two months after the Christian Fellowship Club was banned from showing the controversial Mel Gibson movie "The Passion of the Christ," administrators are scheduled to conduct a press conference justifying why.

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The explanation follows recent accusations from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which is criticizing the college for trampling on the student group's rights to free speech.

"It is appalling that IRCC would violate its own students' moral, constitutional ... rights," Greg Lukianoff, director of legal and public advocacy for the Philadelphia-based organization, wrote in a December letter to IRCC President Edwin Massey.

"Highly offensive material, including profanity, is fully protected under the First Amendment — which IRCC, as a state institution, is obligated to uphold."

IRCC Vice President of Student Affairs Johnny Moore defended the move to stop the showing of the R-rated movie. He said the decision was in step with the college's "long-standing" rule banning college-sponsored student-run groups from airing R-rated films.

The rule, Moore said, aims to protect underage

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students attending the college under its dual-enrollment program with local high schools.

"The decision ... had nothing to do with the movie's religious context," Moore said.

Either way, officials may still have to explain why they stopped the movie but allowed a theater group to perform an explicit skit about faith, sex and Jesus Christ.

"Bottom line, it was a mistake," Moore said Monday. "The established procedures were not followed."

Moore said the college has asked constitutional attorneys to review the college's rules on student activities and events on campus.

"After this legal revision, if changes need to be made," Moore said, "changes will be made."

The press conference is scheduled for 10:30 a. m. at the Fort Pierce campus in Building B, Room 120.

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