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Religious group, IRCC spar over ban of 'Passion'

School says it's being sensitive to its high school-age students.

By Sandra Hong
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, January 19, 2005

FORT PIERCE — A national civil-liberties group said it will sue Indian River Community College if it does not allow a campus Christian group to show the R-rated movie *The Passion of the Christ* and reverse a new rule that restricts the activities of the Christian fellowship club on campus.

"The college is fundamentally violating the group's First Amendment rights," David French, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said Tuesday. "There's nothing to examine or conclude otherwise."

Should the school have allowed the showing of *The Passion of the Christ*?

☐ Yes, the film is an important work.

☐ No, the school should maintain its ban on R-rated films.



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The college maintains that the group, Christian Student Fellowship, was banned from showing the movie because it is R-rated, a policy the school admits is not written in any of its rules but said "long-standing practice" followed by student organizations for years. School officials said because of the college's dual-enrollment program, it wants to remain sensitive to high school students on campus.

Palm Beach Community College, which also runs a dual-enrollment program, does not restrict the showing of R-rated movies on campus, spokeswoman Grace Truman said.

"They're trying to make excuses, and I don't know why," said Tiffany Pink, 19, a physical education student at IRCC. Pink said for the school to ban a film just by its rating was silly, especially since many students have seen films such as *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan* as part of their history lessons.

After IRCC turned down their request to show the movie, Christian Fellowship members expressed concern to the vice president of student affairs, Johnny Moore, and after getting no response, they contacted college president, Edwin Massey. Then they contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based group that focuses on civil rights in the realm of higher education.

On behalf of the Christian group, French wrote a letter to Massey, accusing the college of "violating the rights of its students" and trampling on the "legal and moral rights to free speech and freedom of religion."

French said that IRCC's actions mirror a larger problem of higher-learning institutions cracking down on religious activities on campuses across the nation. In the past four years, nearly 50 students were nearly kicked off or were expelled from college campuses, he said.

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"What's happening at Indian River Community College is not an isolated situation," French said. "We see it as part and parce problem, he said.

On Tuesday, the college announced it has hired a constitutional-law expert in Tallahassee to help it review its policies and pr regarding student activities and campus events. It will include students, as well as fellowship members, to be part of the revie officials said.

"We want to be certain we are striking the proper balance between setting appropriate standards for our campus, while prote of our students," Moore said in a statement.

But balance, student members say, is not what the administration has been practicing toward them.

"We couldn't show our Christian movie, *The Passion*, but they can show different movies about the Holocaust or *Saving Priv: Christeena Koshy*, a 20-year-old nursing student. She also pointed out that last year the college allowed a production of a plz considered pornographic and sacrilegious.

School officials said the Dec. 3 production by a theater group called No Shame — which is not a school-affiliated group — w: that would not have been approved had proper procedures been followed.

"They say we're in college now, that we're all adults," Koshy said. "But now they're saying this movie is too graphic. They're a we're little kids."

"I think that a lot of people are intimidated by things having to do with religion because it's a touchy subject," Pink said.

Since voicing their concerns, leaders of the Christian Fellowship Club said they were called out of classes and ordered to wri the president for going over faculty and staff with their concerns. The school also instituted a new rule for campus clubs that i time faculty adviser to be present at all official club meetings.

The faculty adviser for the Christian Student Fellowship resigned after the school sent out the changes to faculty in a Nov. 22 he could not fulfill the requirements. Members say the rule will hurt their group the most out of the college's 48 student-run cl

"As far as Christianity goes, it's good to fellowship and fellowship often, and that's what we do," Pink said.

Administrators said the new rule is meant to open up communication between student groups and the student affairs office a members are still able to meet informally without a faculty adviser.

Moore, the vice president of student affairs, said he wasn't aware that the new rule was restricting the fellowship from meetin he has seen members praying together on campus.

Michelle Abaldo, spokesman for the school, said R-rated movies, such as *Welcome to Sarajevo*, have been shown as part of but never by a student group. Recently, the school denied another group's request to show *The Last Samurai*, Abaldo said.

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