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Christian group at IRCC can show 'Passion' film

Amid flak, the college lifts a ban on R-rated movies.

By [Sandra Hong](#)

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FORT PIERCE — Under threat of a civil-liberties lawsuit, Indian River Community College officials announced Wednesday that they will lift the college's ban on campus groups showing R-rated movies.

The change will enable a Christian student club to show *The Passion of the Christ*, which the college barred the club from showing on campus last fall because of its R rating.



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

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At the same time, IRCC officials said they will continue to set an "appropriate atmosphere" on campus by requiring all student activities requests to be reviewed by a 12-member committee. This committee — which would include a student member and two community members not affiliated with the college — would ensure all public exhibits, activities and events on campus are consistent with "college mission and community involvement."

"We want to have a campus where everyone feels comfortable here," HenriSue Bynum, associate dean of arts and science, said Wednesday. "We want to make sure those wanting to express their ideas are able to do so and those not wanting to hear those ideas don't have to."

Johnny Moore, vice president of student affairs, said, "As a college, our job is to strike an appropriate balance."

The new policy, which is now in writing, will be included in upcoming editions of the student handbook.

The college's R-rated movie ban was not written in any of its policies, officials admitted, but they insisted it was a "long-standing practice," followed by campus clubs for years in order to protect dual-enrollment students, who are still in high school.

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Now, under the new guidelines, all student activities requests must follow standards of appropriateness. For instance, an exhibit or film including "obscenity, libelous speech, disruption and language used to instigate violence" would not be allowed, IRCC officials said. Such standards have generally been upheld in court, the officials said.

David French, president of the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said the group was "encouraged" by IRCC's action but at the same time "puzzled" by the depth of analysis and review it took for the college to arrive at its

decision.

"The proper balance is the First Amendment, and under the First Amendment you don't have a right to not hear something," French said. "The state has no obligation to protect you from certain ideas.

"If a university is a training ground for democracy, the last thing we need to do is inculcate adults with thinking that says things should be censored or suppressed," he said. "That would change the nature of our society."

Christian Student Fellowship members contacted the foundation after they were told by the college that they could not show *The Passion*. French wrote a fiery letter to IRCC President Edwin Massey accusing the college of "infantilizing" students and violating their constitutional rights.

The college then hired a constitutional law expert, Sydney McKenzie of Holland & Knight, a law firm in Tallahassee, to review its policies regarding student activities and events. The review led to the new committee guidelines and the reversal of the college's R-rating ban.

The president of the Campus Coalition Government, which with the office of student affairs oversees all of IRCC's 48 student clubs, said he supported the college's ban and still does.

"You have your First Amendment rights, but also, you're in a facility that has a set of rules and you have to abide by those rules," said President Raymond Stephens, 18, who will be the student representative on the review committee.

The college also clarified a recent rule requiring a faculty adviser to be present at all business meetings for student groups, a spokesperson said. The adviser for the Christian Student Fellowship resigned after the rule was announced in November, but college officials said there was a misunderstanding about the scope of the new policy. Students still are able to meet informally on campus without a faculty member, they said.

Christian Student Fellowship members have not decided when they'll show *The Passion*, said Elsie Mokoban, 43, the club's publicity coordinator. They are still basking in what they consider a win for them — but for the college, too.

"It's good for progress, and good for freedom, and good for the sake of us being at the college," she said. "We felt we were being pushed a little bit in a corner."

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