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UNC rejects religious fraternity

Associated Press

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. - A Christian student organization which refused to sign a non-discrimination policy has been denied official recognition by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Alpha Iota Omega would not follow university policy because it would require that membership in the group be open to all, regardless of religion. Without official recognition, the fraternity cannot receive student fee money.

The fraternity refused to sign an anti-discrimination clause on a university application because it wanted to choose members who have similar religious beliefs. Now, the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education recently asked UNC-CH Chancellor James Moeser to reconsider the university's position.

On Thursday, the university responded, reiterating its insistence that all student groups have open membership.

Moeser pointed out that UNC-CH has 595 recognized student groups that have agreed to the university's nondiscrimination policy, including 42 religious organizations representing nearly 5,000 members.

"At this university, we encourage students to nurture their moral, spiritual and religious lives," he wrote. "And we do not discriminate against students seeking recognition for religious groups."

Moeser said the university must strike a balance between nondiscrimination and free association both guaranteed in the Constitution.

In 2002, it withheld recognition from InterVarsity Christian Fellowship because that group required its leaders to be Christian. Later, Moeser changed his mind and allowed the group to have its recognition and the student fee money that comes with it.

"This is the second time in a year and a half we've had something like this at UNC Chapel Hill," said Greg Lukianoff, the foundation's director of legal and public advocacy. "The fact that this is happening again is outrageous."

At one point, the group signed UNC-CH's anti-discrimination clause, but members said they would not abide by it, Moeser said. But that form was never submitted, said Trevor Hamm, president of the fraternity that now has only three members.

Hamm said he filed a complaint with the foundation this summer after he was informed that the fraternity was no longer recognized by the university.

"I'm not sure what our next move is going to be," he said. "I just feel that, legally, as a Christian organization at a public university, we have the right to maintain the Christian nature of our organization."

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