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Rutgers lifts ban on Christian fellowship

By Lou Marano
UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

WASHINGTON, April 3 (UPI) -- Faced with a lawsuit, Rutgers University has lifted a ban on a student Christian group that insisted its officers be Christian.

Last September, Rutgers' Director of Student Involvement Lawanda D. Irving "derecognized" the InterVarsity Multi-Ethnic Christian Fellowship on the grounds that requiring a group's leaders to agree with its beliefs constituted impermissible discrimination. The fellowship, whose membership is open to all, was stripped of university funding and denied the use of campus facilities.

Rutgers is the state university of New Jersey.

The matter came to the attention of FIRE -- the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education -- a Philadelphia-based campus watchdog group founded in 1999 by University of Pennsylvania historian Alan Charles Kors and Boston civil rights attorney Harvey A. Sliverglate.

In December, FIRE wrote to Rutgers President Richard L. McCormick, to members of the Board of Trustees and the Board of Governors, and to major donors, urging that the decision be reversed.

With the support of the Alliance Defense Fund, a Phoenix-based public-interest law organization, FIRE Legal Network attorney David A. French filed a lawsuit against Rutgers on Dec. 30 in the Federal District Court of New Jersey for violating the First Amendment rights of fellowship students.

The First Amendment, which constrains only government, states in part: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

On Wednesday, Rutgers Associate Director of Communications Sandra E. Lanman sent United Press International a joint statement

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from the university and the fellowship saying the issues had been "amicably resolved" and the lawsuit "will now be withdrawn."

"The university assured the fellowship that its voting members are permitted to take into account both their own religious beliefs and those of candidates when selecting and voting for their leaders under university policy," the statement said.

FIRE called the outcome "a resounding victory for freedom of conscience."

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