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A Christian Fellowship's Ban on Gay Leaders Splits 2 Campuses

At Tufts and Middlebury, nondiscrimination policies collide with religious-freedom rights

By BETH McMURTRIE

Julie Catalano had been a member of the Tufts Christian Fellowship for three years when she finally decided that it was OK to be gay.

Her friends in the evangelical student organization had known of

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Ms. Catalano's struggle with her sexuality since her freshman year. They accepted her as a member, and allowed her to lead Bible study groups, even as she prayed to God to make her heterosexual.

But in March, when she announced her change of heart while making a bid for a senior leadership position, Ms. Catalano was told that she was not qualified because her beliefs ran counter to the biblical teaching that homosexuality is a sin.

Ms. Catalano filed a complaint against the group, and her personal struggle quickly became a very public one. A student judiciary panel concluded that the Tufts Christian Fellowship had violated the university's nondiscrimination policy and stripped the group of its status as a campus organization, denying it campus funds. The group has appealed, arguing that it rejected Ms. Catalano's bid because of her

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beliefs, not her sexual orientation, and that she was still welcome as a member.

Tufts administrators now find themselves in the awkward position of deciding which ideal trumps the other: the freedom to express one's religious beliefs, or the right to be protected from certain forms of discrimination.

The conflict extends beyond the Tufts campus. Vermont's Middlebury College is facing the same dilemma, stemming from a similar dispute involving its Christian Fellowship chapter. Three years ago, Grinnell College stripped its Christian Fellowship chapter of official recognition over the group's stance on homosexuality -- a decision the group intends to appeal now that the Iowa college has a new president.

People on both sides of the debate claim the moral high ground.

Supporters of the religious groups argue that evangelical Christians are being sacrificed on the altar of political correctness.

"We fear it's the beginning of a trend to shut down religious groups that don't adhere to the current orthodoxy," says David A. French, a lecturer at Cornell Law School who is representing the Tufts Christian Fellowship. "They're saying, 'As long as you look different and have different sexual orientations, that is diversity. But you must all think alike.'"

Advocates for gay students are equally adamant that no organization, religious or secular, should be allowed to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.

"If we start watering down the nondiscrimination policy now, where is it going to end?" asks Gerard Balan, a black Tufts freshman who wrote a letter to the student newspaper asking the campus to support the judiciary panel's decision. "The K.K.K. thinks they're a religious group. They discriminate against African-Americans, and they cite Scripture to support their beliefs."

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that public universities cannot withhold funds from groups solely because they are religious organizations. It has also said that if public institutions use student fees to support campus programs, they must do so without regard to the religious or political views of the organizations receiving the funds. But private institutions have a degree of latitude that public ones do not, legal experts say.

Sheldon E. Steinbach, vice president and general counsel at the American Council on Education, says the question for Tufts and other

institutions wrestling with such problems is whether they apply their nondiscrimination policies consistently and fairly. But, he admits, "it's not a clear-cut issue. There's a real conflict in this instance between religious rights and the rights of the individual."

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA, the national organization that oversees the campus chapters, is crying foul: Why should evangelical Christians be singled out when so many other religions clearly discriminate? Catholicism, Islam, and Orthodox Judaism all hold similar views on homosexuality, the group notes.

"I think the crux of the issue is that we hold certain standards of leadership within the group, as most groups do," says Phil Evans, a spokesman for InterVarsity, a Wisconsin-based organization that has 34,000 student and faculty members in chapters on 560 campuses. When colleges start telling organizations how to choose their leaders, he adds, "they're trying to legislate our religious beliefs."

Jennifer L. Levi, a lawyer at Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, a Boston-based group, says that the freedom-of-religion argument is a red herring. "Students can hold any religious beliefs they want," she says. "Tufts is saying that we do not want to fund an organization that excludes people based on beliefs. It's simply making a decision about where they want to put their money."

Judith Brown, director of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center at Tufts, says that barring Ms. Catalano from a leadership post in the Tufts Christian Fellowship is akin to an Islamic student organization's refusing to let a woman run for treasurer. Neither situation should be permitted, she says, because neither involves the way in which the groups practice their faiths.

Religious leaders at the colleges have found themselves in opposing camps. The Tufts University chaplain, a Unitarian Universalist, has come out in defense of the Christian Fellowship chapter, while the priest and the rabbi who run the Catholic and Jewish student groups signed a petition upholding the nondiscrimination policy. The petition ran as an ad in the student newspaper along with a statement by Ms. Catalano that the matter is not one of religious freedom.

Laurel M. Jordan, the university chaplain at Middlebury, has been closely involved in the debate on that campus over whether to punish the Christian Fellowship chapter for refusing to allow a gay student to run for office. While Ms. Jordan, a United Methodist, disagrees with the group's views on homosexuality, she supports its right to hold those views.

"If we want to have a lot of diversity in terms of religion on campus," she says, "then we're going to have to live with being a little bit uncomfortable."

Middlebury administrators are considering a revision to the college's nondiscrimination policy that would prevent all campus organizations -- even religious ones -- from discriminating on the basis of religion.

Under the proposed policy, a Catholic group could not prevent a Jewish person from running for president of the group. Ms. Jordan finds that troubling, and worries that people are failing to distinguish between bigotry and deeply held religious beliefs.

"I'm more concerned about educating the student body as to why religious organizations are unique," she says. "And it's clear to me they don't see that."

The president, the dean of students, and the university chaplain at Tufts all declined to be interviewed by *The Chronicle*. A statement released by the university said that it would be "inappropriate" for the administration to comment while the matter is under appeal.

Meanwhile, the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a nonprofit group started by Harvey A. Silverglate and Alan Charles Kors, two well-known foes of campus political correctness, has thrown its support behind the Christian Fellowship. Elliott Abrams, an assistant secretary of state during the Reagan administration, also has criticized Tufts' action.

"It's bigotry in my view," says Mr. Abrams, president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a Washington-based organization that says it promotes a Judeo-Christian perspective on domestic and foreign-policy issues. "These are biblically based views on homosexuality. They may be right or wrong, but to say they are not permitted on the Tufts campus is a terrible thing."

Student leaders of the Tufts Christian Fellowship say they are upset by the charges of homophobia. They note that they welcome homosexuals as both members and leaders. Ms. Catalano was rejected for a leadership position, they say, because she was unwilling to advocate what they believe the Bible says about homosexuality, not because she is gay.

"The decision we all came to, both separately and as a group, was that we really needed to follow the Bible," says Sarah Janson, a senior who was one of four student leaders to vote against Ms. Catalano's request to become a leader of the fellowship. "And the Bible is clear in saying that

homosexual practice is wrong."

The senior leaders of the group released a statement last week saying that they all abide by the biblical interpretation that homosexuality is a sin.

Ms. Catalano disagrees. She says that she knows of several other members who think homosexuality is not sinful, and that she was singled out simply because she is gay.

"I think they were scared to have a homosexual as a leader because it conflicted with their interpretation of Scripture," she says. "Now to protect themselves, they're arguing it's not discrimination but scriptural belief."

Last month, the student judiciary panel "de-recognized" the chapter, and stripped it of its university funds, which amount to nearly \$6,000 a year.

A Tufts spokeswoman, Christen Graham, says the group may not use the Tufts name, reserve rooms on the campus, or advertise meetings in Tufts publications. But the group is not banned, she says, because it may use unreserved space.

Fellowship members protested, saying that the judiciary panel had met without their knowledge. Now a panel of students and professors must decide whether the group did, in fact, violate the policy.

At Middlebury, the dispute has proceeded at a more deliberate pace. In that instance, a gay student revealed his sexual orientation to only a few others in the Christian Fellowship chapter before he asked to be considered for a leadership position last year. The senior leaders of the group refused to put his name on the ballot, telling him that candidates must be able to uphold InterVarsity's teachings -- including a belief in biblical infallibility.

"I do believe in the infallibility of the Bible," says the student, who has identified himself publicly on the campus, but asked that his name not be used because his parents do not know he is gay. "I also happen to believe that nowhere in the Bible does it condemn a committed monogamous relationship of two people of the same sex."

The student, who remains a member of the Christian Fellowship, says he tried to work out a compromise for an entire semester before deciding to take his disagreement public. He feels he should have been allowed to run for office so that the membership could decide whether or not he was fit for leadership.

"I want the college to say: 'You don't have the right to prevent a person who is gay from being on the ballot,'" he says. "I admit that to some degree that violates their freedom of religion, but in this case, my civil rights trump that freedom of religion."

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