

Christian groups face discrimination on U.S. campuses

The jury is still out at Tufts University in Medford, Mass., on whether or not Tufts Christian Fellowship, an interdenominational campus chapter affiliated with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, will be reinstated. On April 13 the fellowship was banned by Tuft's Student Judiciary for denying a lesbian a leadership role within its ranks.

Similar controversies have erupted on campuses across the country since November 1996—including Grinnell College in Iowa, Middlebury College in Vermont, Whitman College in Washington and Williams College in Massachusetts—raising questions about whether universities nationwide might soon be permitted to discriminate against religious groups or set unprecedented boundaries on freedom of religious liberty.

Last April, Julie Catalano, a senior at Tufts University, asked to join the Senior Leadership Team of Tufts Christian Fellowship. During her three-year membership, she had openly discussed her struggle with her sexuality. Catalano, an evangelical Christian who originally had accepted the Bible's teachings on homosexuality, fought lesbian inclinations and even contemplated suicide because of her personal struggle.

Finally, however, with much deliberation, she concluded that living out a bisexual lifestyle was not in conflict with Scripture. The fellowship was willing to support Catalano's

aspirations for leadership within the group as long as she did not give in to her sexual desires and adhered to Scripture. When she was no longer willing to do this, the members of the group declined to support her bid for leadership.

Catalano then submitted a one-paragraph complaint to the Tufts Community Union Judiciary, claiming the fellowship had violated the university's anti-discrimination policy. Although an official hearing was formerly required, the Student Judiciary held a 30-minute meeting late one evening to discuss Catalano's expulsion and decided to "de-recognize" the fellowship by prohibiting its meetings on campus, as well as revoking the group's annual funding of \$5,700.

"I don't mean to get dramatic," a university administration official had said to the evangelical group, "but you no longer exist."

As protests against the ruling rose across the country, Tufts University began to backtrack. On May 15 the de-recognition decision was reversed by Student Life, the student-government body, on procedural grounds. Student Life argued that the Christian fellowship had not been given the right to defend its position. The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center at Tufts will hold hearings in the fall to decide the fellowship's fate.

Freedom of association and expression and religious liberty are at the heart of this controversy. According to David French, attorney for Tufts Christian Fellowship, the group was discriminated against because it was expected to violate its religious views to accommodate Catalano.

"What's at stake here," French told Charisma, "is the possibility that this university will set a bad precedent. If Tufts has carte

blanche to put religion at the [top] of the list of things against which they will discriminate, then we will see an accelerated trend of similar action by private universities across the country."

Curtis Chang, InterVarsity adviser for the fellowship, fears Tufts judiciary's decision may threaten other religious student organizations at the college.

"If this standard is allowed to stand, it must apply fairly across the board," he said. "It would mean that someone who practices fundamental Islam can go to a Zionist group and say, 'You must elect me as president without regard to my religious views.'"

Elliott Abrams, a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., makes a similar case.

"One of the more tragic results of such a trend," he said, "would be that ultimately devout people would end up attending a far narrower group of universities. And this would not be good for them, nor for the universities which they otherwise would've attended."

For this reason, Abrams and Keith Pavlischek of the Center for Public Justice held a symposium in Washington, D.C., June 13 to assess the legal and moral ramifications of the controversy. A panel of three scholars and two lawyers battled

wits over whose rights had been violated—gay and lesbian groups or Christian organizations.

Although all five panelists concluded that the initial actions of the Student Judiciary were wrong, they agreed for the need for more discussion on these issues.

“It would be a shame if an institution such as Tufts University, in an effort to make the world very safe for one, made it entirely unsafe for the other,” said William Galston, director of the University of Maryland’s Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy.

Even Stephen Macedo, a practicing homosexual and a professor of politics at Princeton University stated that “freedom of expression should be given to all groups—whatever their belief system.”