

‘Dumb Down’ Drama’s ‘Offensive Religious Message’ or Else, Says College Adviser

Alliance Defending Freedom sent Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington, North Carolina, a letter on behalf of a student not permitted to perform his drama club production because of its Christian message. The club’s adviser said he would only allow the production if the student agreed to “dumb down” the religious content until it was not “obvious.”

“Public universities and colleges are supposed to be marketplaces of ideas, where all viewpoints—including religious ones—are welcome. College officials should know that the First Amendment protects students’ religious speech, even if some people find it offensive. And it prohibits those officials from trying to purge student productions of all things religious,” said ADF Litigation Staff Counsel Travis Barham.

In September, the drama club adviser told Justin Graves, a dual-enrollment student at CFCC, that his production could not be performed because it has religious themes, even though it received unanimous approval from the drama club.

The adviser claimed that the production would violate the First Amendment if it included the religious themes, and he advised Graves to “dumb down” the religious content until it was not “obvious” to avoid any potential lawsuits or “offending” anyone. Ironically, the adviser allowed the drama club to sponsor other productions that could potentially cause offense, including ones that included rape and incest themes.

“Since at least 1981, the Supreme Court has clearly indicated that public universities cannot single out religious speech for special, detrimental treatment,” the ADF letter explains.

"Indeed, when 'the government targets not subject matter, but particular views taken by speakers on a subject, the violation of the First Amendment is all the more blatant.'"

"The 'Supreme Court has held time and again, both within and outside of the school context, that the mere fact that someone might take offense at the content of speech is not sufficient justification for prohibiting it,'" the letter states.

"Public colleges are perhaps the ultimate example of places that should recognize the constitutionally protected freedom of expression," added ADF Senior Legal Counsel David Hacker. "We are asking CFCC to lift its censorship of religious speech and allow this production to proceed."