

InterVarsity to File Briefs on Religious Liberty Restrictions at Campuses

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship staff and students will soon submit statements to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights about incidents where universities have attempted to restrict the religious liberties of student groups in the name of nondiscrimination, the ministry said Thursday.

The Civil Rights Commission announced last month a briefing focused on reconciling nondiscrimination policies with religious liberties is scheduled for later this month.

"I'm grateful that the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights is looking into the conflict between the nondiscrimination principles on campus and its affect on **religious freedom**," Greg Jao, InterVarsity's national field director, told Charisma News on Friday.

"We are hopeful that this investigation by the Civil Rights Commission will result in more colleges and universities being willing to resolve perceived conflicts between nondiscrimination policies and our country's strong heritage of religious freedom," an InterVarsity statement says. "We welcome the opportunity to participate in their deliberative process."

The issue started more than 10 years ago, when campuses such as Harvard and Rutgers attempted to limit InterVarsity's ministry on campus because of the organization's requirement that student leaders affirm its doctrinal statement.

Even more campuses have pressed InterVarsity and other campus ministries on the use of religious criteria to select student leaders since the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court case *CLS v.*

Martinez.

“Increasingly on college and university campuses,” Jao said, “we’re finding that universities are applying nondiscrimination policies unwisely or in a sweepingly broad, thoughtless sort of way.”

Universities have amended their nondiscrimination policies to permit religious student groups to use religious criteria in leadership selection in most cases—such as at Harvard and Rutgers, and more recently at Ohio State, Michigan, Minnesota, Maryland, Florida, Texas and Tufts.

At Ohio State University the student organization registration guidelines now state: “A student organization formed to foster or affirm the sincerely held religious beliefs of its members may adopt eligibility criteria for its Student Officers that are consistent with those beliefs.”

However, some schools will not allow any exceptions to their nondiscrimination policy, at least for religious organizations. Although fraternities and sororities are allowed to be selective based on gender, and athletic teams can discriminate based on gender and able-bodied status, InterVarsity and other religious organizations are treated differently.

“We’re not asking for a privileged place on campus, but an equal place,” Jao explained. “Every religious group is going to use religious criteria to select its leaders.”

Vanderbilt University prohibited 14 religious organizations, including several InterVarsity chapters, from becoming registered student organizations (RSOs) last year because they follow the guidelines of faith in choosing leaders. As a result, those organizations—which represent over 10 percent of the students on campus—may not partner with RSOs for the purposes of community service, worship or learning.

"We've pointed out that this kind of broad reading against nondiscriminatory policies ends up excluding religious groups from campus and marginalizing religious students on campus," Jao said. "This frustrates what the administrators are trying to do, which is to create a welcome, nondiscriminatory feeling on campus."

The board of Trustees at Rollins College in Winter Park, Fla., voted unanimously last week to reject a request by the school's InterVarsity chapter to be allowed to require its leaders to be followers of the Christian faith.

The board said in a Feb. 22 statement: "The principles of the nondiscrimination policy, which are at the heart of the educational process, are inconsistent with allowing exceptions for student organizations; such exceptions would be inconsistent with the processes of learning and growth that the college seeks to foster."

InterVarsity submitted an appeal to the Rollins showing how other universities have amended their policies to permit religious groups to use religious criteria, but Jao said the board "resolutely chose not to."

"I think when universities claim they're against all form of discrimination they're being a little disingenuous," Jao noted. "All we're saying is, shouldn't religious groups have an equal voice on campus?"

However, Jao said this should not discourage Christians from applying to colleges like Rollins.

"I think Christian parents and students should apply to the school. What we need is not fewer Christians on that campus but more."

Jao invites the church to pray for college and university campuses.

"These are not cultural battlefields to us," he explained. "These are mission fields to us. Spiritually it doesn't surprise me that Rollins College has chosen this action because I don't ever think the mission field is welcome to the gospel at first.

"Pray that Jesus makes Himself known at Rollins," he concluded. "We're praying that for nonreligious universities and campuses, more students would come and see the university as a place of learning and also the mission field."