

Student Sues Tenn. College for Strict Faith-Sharing Policy



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A Pellissippi State Community College student is suing the school for violating his First Amendment rights. The Knoxville, Tenn., college has prohibited Mark Dew from speaking about his faith and handing out free religious literature on campus.

Campus police told Dew, 44, he could not “preach” and distribute literature because sharing one’s faith is prohibited under the Tennessee Board of Regents’ “solicitation” policy enforced at the college, which requires individual students to apply three weeks prior to speaking or dispensing literature and then pay a \$30 fee.

“Christian students at public colleges shouldn’t be deterred from sharing their beliefs because of burdensome, unconstitutional policies,” says Casey Mattox, legal counsel for ADF, which filed the lawsuit on Dew’s behalf. “First Amendment-protected rights never come with a price tag or waiting period, and college students don’t lose them simply by walking onto campus.”

The lawsuit contends that Dew was acting peacefully and “sought to engage in discussion of his religious beliefs and distribution of free literature about his faith.”

A PSCC police officer warned Dew in October that speaking about his faith and handing out religious literature on campus was prohibited under a “no soliciting” rule enforced on campus, even though he wasn’t selling anything.

School officials informed Dew a month later that he could not speak about his faith or hand out Christian literature because he was an individual and not part of a recognized student group.

According to , however, Dew was still censored even after he connected with the Pellissippi Collegiate Ministry, a Christian organization that had approval from Pellissippi to hold a limited number of religious functions on campus. A school official informed Dew he could speak about his faith only during specific ministry events.

A different campus security officer approached Dew in the spring semester, yelling and forcefully commanding him to cease his activities because of the “no solicitation policy.”

Andrew Fox, an ADF attorney and lead counsel for Dew, sent a letter in February to school officials, stating that the policy requiring individual students to submit an application 14 business days in advance before charging a \$30 fee “if accepted” “is a violation of student rights protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. An attorney for the Tennessee Board of Regents defended the policy, claiming that it was “reasonable and viewpoint neutral.”

Dew applied three weeks ahead of time and paid the \$30 fee so he could share his faith Wednesday during the first full week of the summer semester.

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