

University Student Suffering Discrimination for Religious Beliefs Is Vindicated in Court

Religious freedom comes at a price—one that Florida State University student Jack Denton no longer has to pay.

The university has settled a religious freedom lawsuit on behalf of former student Jack Denton, who was discriminated against for sharing his faith in a private student club chat.

Denton served as the Student Senate president at FSU. Prior to this role, he was actively involved in student government. He shared his Catholic faith with his peers—many of whom he considered friends—in a private chat.

The conversation debated the ethicality of Black Lives Matter and organizations like ACLU as they relate to Catholic beliefs. Denton held that the groups advocate for beliefs contrary to Catholic teachings.

His private messages were shared on social media, at which time the words spoken in love and concern were misrepresented and taken out of context. He was then removed from his office and forced to undergo religious tests.

One user wrote of Denton's views, "I am disgusted that other Catholics are attempting to stand behind him with his outdated and extreme cult mindset. Those who choose not to denounce Jack Denton tonight should expect the same action and scrutiny from the entire community moving forward."

Alliance Defending Freedom, the Christian nonprofit advocacy group, took Denton's case to court, after the university

failed to address the violation of Denton's First Amendment rights.

"Public universities can't single out and punish students for their religious beliefs," said ADF legal counsel Logan Spina. "We are pleased that Florida State has finally affirmed its commitment to students' First Amendment rights on campus. All students should be able to peacefully share their personal convictions without fear of retaliation."

ADF pressured the university to reinstate Denton as Senate president while the case was investigated and brought to court. The university complied in October, 2020.

The university also agreed to issue a statement under the settlement agreement that affirms the school's intention to protect their students' First Amendment rights, as well as restoring Denton's lost wages, covering attorney's fees and issuing \$10,000 in damages to him.

"Today's college students are our future legislators, judges and voters. That's why it's so important that public universities model the First Amendment values they're supposed to be teaching students," said ADF senior counsel Tyson Langhofer, director of the ADF Center for Academic Freedom. "Student governments should be encouraging and respecting robust debate and ideas, not silencing and punishing students for expressing their beliefs. We are encouraged that the university has finally reached the right conclusion." {eo}

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