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### Vanderbilt University Suppressing Christian Student Groups, on: 2011/9/26 12:57

Professor Says Vanderbilt Suppressing Christian Student Groups Amid Shutdown Threats

By John Roberts

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Is Vanderbilt University flirting with the suppression of religion? Yes, according to Carol Swain, a professor at Vanderbilt's Law School.

Specifically, Swain is referring to four Christian student groups being placed on "provisional status" after a university review found them to be in non-compliance with the school's nondiscrimination policy.

Vanderbilt says the student organizations cannot require that leaders share the group's beliefs, goals and values. Carried to its full extent, it means an atheist could lead a Christian group, a man a woman's group, a Jew a Muslim group or vice versa.

If they remain in non-compliance, the student organizations risk being shut down.

So what's behind this? Flashback to last fall. An openly gay undergrad at Vanderbilt complained he was kicked out of a Christian fraternity. The university wouldn't identify the fraternity, but campus newspaper the "Hustler" reported it was Beta Upsilon Chi. As a result, the school took a look at the constitutions of some 300 student groups and found about a dozen, including five religious groups to be in non-compliance with Vanderbilt's nondiscrimination policy. All were placed on provisional status.

Among the groups threatened with shut down is the Christian Legal Society. It ran afoul with this language from its constitution. "Each officer is expected to lead Bible studies, prayer and worship at chapter meetings." CLS President Justin Gunter told me, "We come together to do things that Christians do together. Pray, and have Bible studies."

To that, Rev. Gretchen Person — interim director of the Office of Religious Life at Vanderbilt — responded "Vanderbilt policies do not allow this expectation/qualification for officers." Gunter has been negotiating with the university and has taken some language out of the CLS constitution - including the requirement that Student Coordinators "should strive to exemplify Christ-like qualities." But he says he has to draw the line at the requirement regarding Bible studies, prayer and worship.

He told me, "At the point where they're saying we can't have Bible studies and prayer meetings as part of our constitution — if we go beyond that — we're compromising the very identity of who we are as Christians and the very thing we believe as religious individuals."

Vanderbilt officials refused to be interviewed, and instead released a statement saying in part "We are committed to making our campus a welcoming environment for all of our students." In regard to the offending student organizations, officials said they "continue to work with them to achieve compliance."

CLS's Gunter says his group's membership is open to anyone, but leaders have a different requirement. "CLS is a Christian organization", he told me. "That means to preserve our integrity, we need Christian leaders."

Carol Swain is CLS's faculty advisor. She insists the university has gone way beyond political correctness with its actions and demands. "It seems reasonable", she told me, "to require that leaders share the beliefs of the organizations that they seek to lead." She sees this as part of a larger problem at liberal-leaning universities across the nation. She says, "I see it as part of a larger attack on religious freedom that's taking place across the country — particularly when it comes to conservative groups."

This is familiar territory for the Christian Legal Society. Last year the Supreme Court ruled against a lawsuit it filed against Hastings Law School in California. CLS had argued that Hastings' "all-comers" policy regarding student groups infringed on its right to religious freedom.

Vanderbilt does not have a specific "all-comers" policy in the way that Hastings did. Its nondiscrimination policy follows the standard federal one, with the requirement that student "Organizations must abide by the nondiscrimination policies in order to be registered."

And that is why CLS and its supporters believe Vanderbilt has over-reached in this case. It would be discriminatory, they say if Christian groups were allowed on campus, but not a Wiccan society (Vanderbilt, by the way recently announced it would recognize official Wiccan holidays). But to tell CLS and others that they cannot require their leaders to be Christian, they say, is both discriminatory and threatens to secularize religion.

You might be asking yourself, even if they allowed a person who didn't share their beliefs to run for a leadership position, how would he or she ever get elected? That's an argument the Catholic student group at Vanderbilt agreed with. Vandy Catholic changed its constitution to read that potential board members need only be "undergraduate students at Vanderbilt University."

CLS says it could never agree to that. The Vanderbilt group – and the national CLS organization are worried about "infiltration", arguing that a person hostile to the group could rise to a leadership position, then attempt to tear it apart through conflict. CLS did have a problem at Washburn University Law School when a student whose religious beliefs were contrary to the group was allowed to lead a Bible study. When CLS stopped him he complained. Washburn put CLS on "provisional status", but reinstated the group when CLS sued.

It's unknown at this point if the national Christian Legal Society will make another trip to court over the Vanderbilt issue. Justin Gunter is hopeful that it can be worked out before it comes to that point.

He told me, "I think as they really delve into the issues, they will change their minds and they will agree to us and allow Vanderbilt to be a place that really respects all religious people and provides religious diversity."

**Re: Vanderbilt University Suppressing Christian Student Groups - posted by Lysa (), on: 2011/9/26 13:27**

Here's an article about what Vanderbilt Nursing Program tried to do:

University Changes Policy Requiring Students to Sign Abortion Pledge

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/university-changes-policy-requiring-students-to-sign-abortion-pledge-48483/>

Being on the news and with all the attention, they finally changed it with the 2011 Summer class.

**Re: Vanferbilt, on: 2011/9/26 13:43**

Time to wake up. I am reading reports in this forum and other places where Christians are being marginalized in this country. The thing I find intriguing is these are Christian groups. No Moslem or Islamic groups. Hmmm?