

Judge says InterVarsity can require its leaders to be Christian

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Yes, a Christian student group can require its leaders to be Christian. That's the decision a judge reached last week in *InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA v. the University of Iowa*, a lawsuit the evangelical Christian campus ministry brought against the university and several of its leaders after the school booted InterVarsity and other religiously affiliated student groups for requiring their leaders to share their faiths. Those groups also included Muslims, Sikhs, and Latter-day Saints, according to a statement from InterVarsity.

"We must have leaders who share our faith," InterVarsity director of external relations Greg Jao said in the written statement. "No group—religious or secular—could survive with leaders who reject its values. We're grateful the court has stopped the University's religious discrimination, and we look forward to continuing our ministry on campus for years to come."

At least three University of Iowa leaders are being held personally accountable to cover the costs of any damages awarded later to InterVarsity, according to US district judge Stephanie M. Rose's September 27 ruling. The ruling left open the possibility that university president Bruce Harreld still could be found liable, too.

Rose's decision comes on the heels of a ruling she made earlier this year in a similar case involving the university and a student group called Business Leaders in Christ. Because she felt university leaders should have understood after that case how to treat the groups fairly, the judge is holding them personally accountable.

That's not unusual, according to Daniel Blomberg, senior counsel at Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which represented InterVarsity.

"When government officials violate the Constitution, break the law and they hurt somebody, then they can be responsible for damages—for damage they have caused," Blomberg told Religion News Service.

The lawsuit came in August 2018 after the University of Iowa claimed InterVarsity was violating the university's human rights policy by requiring leaders to affirm the organization's statement of faith. That policy prohibits discrimination based on race, creed, color, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other attributes. In June 2018, the university deregistered InterVarsity for more than a month, returning it to good standing only after it sued.

During that time, the University of Iowa limited InterVarsity's access to campus, froze its bank account, shut down its website, and labeled it "defunct" for lack of student interest, according to a statement from Becket. —Religion News Service