

Jeff King, Chair
Senate Judiciary Committee
State Capitol-341 E
Topeka, KS 66612

March 6, 2015

Chairman King and Members of the Committee,

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA supports over 900 student-led chapters on over 650 campuses across the country. In Kansas, we support 17 chapters at 10 campuses.

Increasing numbers of universities are interpreting otherwise good non-discrimination policies in ways which prohibit religious groups from using religious criteria in leadership selection. In February, I received word that Eastern Connecticut State University intended to block recognition of the InterVarsity chapter on that campus. In the past week, I have had conversations with an additional two campuses across that have made similar threats. Within the last four years, administrators have de-recognized (or threatened to derecognize) religious groups (including Muslim Student Associations) at SUNY-Buffalo, University of Delaware, UM-College Park, University of North Carolina, University of North Florida, University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, University of Nebraska, Oklahoma State University, Boise State University, Mira Costa Community College, Merced Community College, and the 23-campus California State University system. Ohio State University recently attempted to prohibit an InterVarsity chapter from requiring its leaders to be Christians even though a state law similar to the one you are considering is already on the books. I urge you to protect Kansas students from this growing problem.

We value a tolerant, inclusive, welcoming campus environment; therefore, our groups welcome all students to be active participants and members. In fact, nearly 26% of InterVarsity's active participants do not identify as Christians. It's partially for this reason that religious student groups require clear religious-based criteria for leadership. Religious-based leadership criteria help insure that the student group remains faithful to its original religious tradition, purpose and goals even as large numbers of non-adherents participate in the group.

Religious leadership requirements are required by our Scriptures and consistent with 2,000 years of church teaching. We cannot pretend that we do not have religious-based leadership criteria. That would be unfaithful to our faith tradition and would be precisely the kind of hypocrisy that people rightly condemn religious believers for. This bill protects the right of students to select their religious leaders in ways which are consistent with their religious tradition.

Religious leadership requirements describe the necessary skills and conditions for student religious leaders to accomplish their religious leadership responsibilities. They insure that religious meetings – bible studies, prayer meetings, mentoring new converts, worship times – are led by people who actually believe what they are teaching is true. Students do not expect that of college religion classes. They do expect it of religious student groups. These leadership requirements are akin to the skill requirements commonplace in intercollegiate athletics or in music and drama departments. Like fraternities that select only men and sororities that select only women, religious groups should be able to choose leaders who are members of their religious communities.

Some administrators have argued that a democratic process would be sufficient to protect the religious character of a religious student group as students would naturally vote for fellow believers. We disagree. First, it places minority religious groups – or religious groups with unpopular positions – at significant risk of being taken over as has nearly happened on several of campuses. Second, it's disrespectful of religious tradition. No religion believes that its beliefs should be subject to annual popular vote. Third, it disregards the historical record. Just a century ago, the YMCA was the largest, most vibrant campus ministry in the country. While it continues to do good work in our communities, no one would confuse it for a vibrant Christian campus ministry today.

Some may mischaracterize this bill as a “right to discriminate” bill. We disagree. This bill clarifies university non-discrimination policies so that they achieve what they were designed to achieve. This bill creates a truly inclusive, welcoming, non-discriminatory environment for religious student groups.

First, religious student groups make their most distinct and valuable contribution to campus life when they remain true to their religious purposes. This requires that they be led by people who embrace and embody those religious purposes. Over 55% of InterVarsity's students are students of color. When they come to campus, they seek religious communities which reflect their own faith traditions. Our chapters provide a valuable point of connection, social support, and leadership development for these students.

Second, even if administrators find religious-based leadership criteria undemocratic or distasteful, they should make room for viewpoints which they find anachronistic or “backward” if they value a truly diverse, tolerant campus. In fact, groups with views which are not accepted by the majority are in particular need of protection under non-discrimination rules. They should not need protection from non-discrimination rules.

Third, it would be ironic if universities were allowed to use a nondiscrimination policy to penalize, rather than protect, students who want to express their religious identity on campus. It would undermine the universities' own non-discrimination goals if their inclusion policies reduced the number and diversity of religious groups on campus. Sadly, this has happened and continues to happen on campus.

The bill under consideration clarifies university non-discrimination policies to insure that religious groups are robust contributors to the inclusive, welcoming, and tolerant campus

environment we all long to see. It protects students from state-sponsored overreach which would dictate the internal leadership structure of religious groups.

Seven other states have already passed similar legislation to protect their students. I urge Kansas to do the same.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jamie Veeder
Staff Leader
InterVarsity Christian Fellowship
Kansas University