

Christian counselors say they encounter discrimination over views on homosexuality

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—When are religious views on homosexuality an issue of religious and academic freedom, and when are they discrimination? That’s a question raised by counselors and educators across the country.

Recently, a federal judge ruled against Jennifer Keeton, a student at Augusta State University who was ordered to either undergo “diversity sensitivity” training after she expressed conservative Christian views on the issue of homosexuality or leave the school’s counseling program. Her attorneys announced they are appealing the case.

Julea Ward was dismissed from Eastern Michigan University after she declined to counsel a patient in a homosexual relationship as part of her counseling degree program.

(PHOTO/RNS/Courtesy of Gene Parunak/Alliance Defense Fund)

In March, a federal judge supported the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in its dismissal of a Georgia counselor who ended a session with a lesbian client and referred her to another counselor because of her religious views.

And in Maine last year, a school counselor received complaints for appearing in a TV ad that opposed the state’s gay-marriage law.

As homosexuality becomes more acceptable in American society, some Christian counselors say they are being persecuted for their views as the pendulum, in their eyes, swings too far toward political correctness.

Professional groups, meanwhile, say counselors are duty-bound to be able to handle any number of cases, including those that present situations that might conflict with the counselor's personal religious beliefs.

Julea Ward, a conservative Christian student at [Eastern Michigan University](#), was a few credits away from finishing her master's degree in counseling in 2009 when she was assigned a student who previously had been counseled about a homosexual relationship.

"She went to her supervisor and said, 'I may not be the best person for this particular client,'" said Jeremy Tedesco, Ward's attorney, who has advised his client not to speak publicly about the case.

Ward later was brought up on disciplinary charges and eventually was dismissed from Eastern Michigan for violating the [American Counseling Association's Code of Ethics](#) and demonstrating an unwillingness to change her behavior.

On July 26, a federal judge upheld the school's dismissal of Ward.

Her case will be appealed, said Tedesco, an attorney with the conservative legal firm Alliance Defense Fund, which has taken up at least four similar cases in the last year alone.

Tedesco thinks the appeal could take the case all the way to the Supreme Court, bringing the issue to further prominence.

"The judge here definitely got it wrong, in our opinion," he said. "In my view, we're going to see a trend of more universities doing this."

Ward's case and other similar ones have left some professionals wondering

whether Christian views opposing homosexuality are compatible with the counseling profession and whether such views are protected under the auspices of religious freedom.

The question of how much students and professors should be allowed to express religious views that frown on homosexual behavior remains unresolved, but cases like Ward's and others seem to indicate little tolerance for personal religious views within academia.

Students in psychology and counseling programs are subject to the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics instead of university rules that may allow greater room for academic freedom.

Ward's legal team says the professional codes are unconstitutional and should not be a basis for discipline, especially at public universities.

"It's a big difference between teaching a code of ethics and enforcing them," said Tedesco. "Those kind of policies can't withstand constitutional scrutiny."

University administrators disagree, saying they have to abide by professional standards if they want their students' degrees to be taken seriously in the workforce.

"We have to go through accreditation standards," said Walter Kraft, Eastern Michigan's vice president for communications. "We have to honor whatever guidelines might exist."

Psychology and counseling professionals agree it sometimes is appropriate for them to deny their services, as Ward did—when there is a conflict of interest, a close relationship, or unchangeable bias. In practice, they say counselors and psychologists need to be as open-minded as possible, given the myriad of personalities they encounter.

